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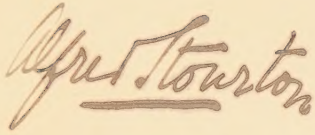

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THE

DOCTOR'S WIFE

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET"

ETC. ETC. ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

SECOND EDITION

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CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	"Oh, my Cousin, shallow-hearted!"	1
II.	Under Lord Thurston's Oak . .	35
III.	Roland says, "Amen" . . .	62
IV.	Mr. Lansdell relates an Adventure	74
V.	The First Warning	100
VI.	The Second Warning	143
VII.	What might have been! . . .	171
VIII.	"Oceans should divide us" . .	187
IX.	"Once more the Gate behind me falls"	219
X.	"My Love's a noble Madness" . .	242
XI.	A little Cloud	259
XII.	Lady Gwendoline does her Duty .	280
XIII.	"For Love himself took part against himself"	301

THE DOCTOR'S WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

"OH, MY COUSIN, SHALLOW-HEARTED!"

ROLAND LANSDELL dined with his uncle and cousin at Lowlands upon the day after the picnic; but he said very little about his afternoon ramble in Hurstonleigh Grove. He lounged upon the lawn with his cousin Gwendoline, and played with the dogs, and stared at the old pictures in the long dreary billiard-room, where the rattle of the rolling balls had been unheard for ages; and he entered into a languid little political discussion with Lord Ruysdale, and broke off—or rather dropped out of it—in the middle with a yawn, declaring that he knew

very little about the matter, and was no doubt making a confounded idiot of himself, and would his uncle kindly excuse him, and reserve his admirable arguments for some one better qualified to appreciate them.

The young man had no political enthusiasm. He had been in the great arena, and had done his little bit of wrestling, and had found himself baffled, not by the force of his adversaries, but by the *vis inertiæ* of things in general. Eight or nine years ago Roland Lansdell had been very much in earnest,—too much in earnest, perhaps,—for he had been like a race-horse that goes off with a rush and makes running for all the other horses, and then breaks down ignominiously midway betwixt the starting-post and the judge's chair. There was no "stay" in this bright young creature. If the prizes of life could have been won by that fiery rush, he would have won them; but as it was, he was fain to fall back among the ranks of the nameless, and let the plodders rush on towards the golden goal.

Thus it was that Roland Lansdell had been

a kind of failure and disappointment. He had begun so brilliantly, he had promised so much. "If this young man is so brilliant at one-and-twenty," people had said to one another, "what will he be by the time he is forty-five?" But at thirty Roland was nothing. He had dropped out of public life altogether, and was only a drawing-room favourite; a lounger in gay Continental cities; a drowsy idler in fair Grecian islands; a scribbler of hazy little verses about pretty women, and veils, and fans, and daggers, and jealous husbands, and moonlit balconies, and withered orange-flowers, and poisoned chalices, and midnight revels, and despair; a beautiful useless, purposeless creature; a mark for manœuvering mothers; a hero for sentimental young ladies,—altogether a mockery, a delusion, and a snare.

This was the man whom Lady Gwendoline and her father had found at Baden Baden, losing his money *pour se distraire*. Gwendoline and her father were on their way back to England. They had gone abroad for the benefit of

the Earl's income; but Continental residence is expensive nowadays, and they were going back to Lowlands, Lord Ruysdale's family seat, where at least they would live free of house-rent, and where they could have garden-stuff and dairy produce, and hares and partridges, and silvery trout from the fish-ponds in the shrubberies, for nothing; and where they could have long credit from the country tradesfolk, and wax or composition candles for something less than tenpence apiece.

Lord Ruysdale persuaded Roland to return with them, and the young man assented readily enough. He was tired of the Continent; he was tired of England too, for the matter of that; but those German gaming-places, those Grecian islands, those papist cities where the bells were always calling the faithful to their drowsy devotions in darksome old cathedrals, were his last weariness, and he said, Yes; he should be glad to see Mordred again; he should enjoy a month's shooting; and he could spend the winter in Paris. Paris was as good as any other place in the winter.

He had so much money and so much leisure, and so little knew what to do with himself. He knew that his life was idle and useless; but he looked about him, and saw that very little came of other men's work; he cried with the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem, "Behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit, and there is no profit under the sun: that which is crooked cannot be made straight, and that which is wanting cannot be numbered: the thing that has been it is that which shall be."

Do you remember that saying of Mirabeau's which Mr. Lewes has put upon the title-page of his wonderful Life of Robespierre: "This man will do great things," said the statesman,—I quote loosely from memory,—"for he believes in himself"? Roland Lansdell did not believe in himself; and lacking that grand faculty of self-confidence, he had grown to doubt and question all other things, as he doubted and questioned himself. Nature, which had bestowed her gifts upon him with such a wantonly lavish hand, had refused him the greatest

gift of all,—the sublime power of faith. He was no arrogant sceptic, who sets his own intellect above the divine mysteries of the universe. He had tried to believe, he had wrestled with himself, and had prayed earnestly but ignorantly for help; but the help had never come; and when, in the aching void of his heart, there grew a dreary conviction that no help ever could come to him, he bowed his head, and resigned himself to live in the darkness, since for him the light was never to shine. Heaven knows how he had striven to pierce the veil—how patiently he had watched for the star; but there was no lessening of the dreadful darkness, there was no glimmer of the mystic glory. He who scoffed at most things had never scoffed at this one supreme mystery, whose splendour had never been revealed to him. He envied the simple worshippers before taper-lit shrines in the dusky aisles of foreign cathedrals; he envied them this childlike and unquestioning faith, which could recognise the glory of God amongst all that faded splendour of artificial flowers and gilded candle-

sticks and waxen images. He asked no better gift than this great power of belief, and would fain have given all his worldly wisdom could he have made himself like unto one of those little children whom he saw on festival-days with white wreaths upon their heads and sanctified candles in their hands.

Roland Lansdell could not believe. Sometimes on great festival-days he entered those solemn cathedrals, and stood amongst the pious crowd, as hushed and reverent in his manner as any worshipper present; for he was a gentleman, and respected the creeds of other people. He liked the grand music of the organ, the pure tones of the swelling voices; he was penetrated with the devotional spirit of the place and the hour; but he could not believe. He believed in the existence of a great and good Man, who taught the purest system of morality that was ever conceived by genius, and who gave His life in testimony of His truth: but he could understand no more than this; and being without the power of faith, he could only believe that which he could

understand. The Redeemer of mankind was for him only a great teacher: the sacrifice on Calvary was only another form of the death of Socrates; another immolation of genius and truth to the besotted ignorance of mankind.

"I will do my best to lead a good life, and be useful to my fellow-creatures," Mr. Lansdell said, when he left Magdalen College, Oxford, with a brilliant reputation, and the good wishes of all the magnates of the place.

He began life with this intention firmly implanted in his mind. He knew that he was a rich man, and that there was a great deal expected of him. The parable of the Talents was not without its import to him, though he had no belief in the divinity of the Teacher. There was no great enthusiasm in his nature, but he was very sincere; and he went into Parliament as a progressive young Liberal, and set to work honestly to help his fellow-creatures.

Alas for poor humanity! he found the task more wearisome than the labour of Sisyphus, or the toil of the daughters of Danäus. The stone

was always rolling back upon the labourer; the water was perpetually pouring out of the perforated buckets. He cultivated the working man, and founded a club for him, where he might have lectures upon geology and astronomy, and where, after twelve hours' bricklaying or road-making, he might improve his mind with the works of Stuart Mill or Maculloch, and where he could have almost any thing; except those two simple things which he especially wanted,—a pint of decent beer and a quiet puff at his pipe. Roland Lansdell was the last man to plan any institution upon puritanical principles; but he *did not believe in himself*, so he took other people's ideas as the basis of his work; and by the time he opened his eyes to the necessity of beer and tobacco, the workman had grown tired and had abandoned him.

This was only one of many schemes which Mr. Lansdell attempted while he was still very young, and had a faint belief in his fellow-creatures: but this is a sample of the rest. Roland's schemes were not successful; they were not suc-

cessful because he had no patience to survive preliminary failure, and wade on to ultimate success through a slough of despond and discouragement. He picked his fruit before it was ripe, and was angry when he found it sour, and would hew down the tree that bore so badly, and plant another. His fairest projects fell to the ground, and he left them there to rot: while he went away somewhere else to build new schemes and make fresh failures.

Moreover, Mr. Lansdell was a hot-headed, impulsive young man, and there were some things which he could not endure. He could bear ingratitude better than most people, because he was generous-minded, and set a very small price upon the favours he bestowed; but he could not bear to find that the people whom he sought to benefit were bored by his endeavours to help them. He had no ulterior object to gain, remember. He had no solemn conviction of a sacred duty to be performed at any cost to himself, in spite of every hindrance, in the face of every opposition. He *only* wanted to be useful to his fellow-creatures;

and when he found that they repudiated his efforts, he fell away from them, and resigned himself to be useless, and to let his fellow-creatures go their own wilful way. So, almost immediately after making a brilliant speech about the poor-laws, at the very moment when people were talking of him as one of the most promising young Liberals of his day, Mr. Lansdell abruptly turned his back upon St. Stephen's, accepted the Chiltern Hundreds, and went abroad.

He had experienced another disappointment besides the failure of his philanthropic schemes, —a disappointment that had struck home to his heart, and had given him an excuse for the cynical indifference, the hypochondriacal infidelity, which grew upon him from this time.

Mr. Lansdell had been his own master from his earliest manhood, for his father and mother had died young. The Lansdells were not a long-lived race; indeed, there seemed to be a kind of fatality attached to the masters of Mordred Priory: and in the long galleries where the portraits of dead-and-gone Lansdells looked gravely down

upon the frivolous creatures of to-day, the stranger was apt to be impressed by the youth of all the faces,—the absence of those gray beards and bald foreheads which give dignity to most collections of family-portraits. The Lansdells of Mordred were not a long-lived race, and Roland's father had died suddenly when the boy was away at Eton; but his mother, Lady Anna Lansdell, only sister of the present Earl of Ruysdale, lived to be her son's companion and friend in the best and brightest years of his life. His life seemed to lose its brightness when he lost her; and I think this one great grief, acting upon a naturally pensive temperament, must have done much to confirm that morbid melancholy which over-shadowed Mr. Lansdell's mind.

His mother died; and the grand inducement to do something good and great, which might have made her proud and happy, died with her. Roland said that he left the purest half of his heart behind him in the Protestant cemetery at Nice. Alas! the great misery of his life afflicted him most terribly here. He did not believe! For

him there was no sweet whisper of hope amid the tempest of despair. In vain, in vain he strove to look beyond that grave in the South of France. He prayed: but it may be that he prayed amiss, for the light never came to him. He went back to England, and made those brilliant speeches of which I have spoken; and was not too proud to seek for sympathy and consolation from the person whom he loved next best to her whom he had lost,—that person was Lady Gwendoline Pomphrey, his betrothed wife, the beloved niece of his dead mother.

There had been so complete a sympathy between Lady Anna Lansdell and her son, that the young man had suffered himself, half unconsciously, to be influenced by his mother's predilections. She was very fond of Gwendoline; and when the two families were in Midlandshire, Gwendoline spent the greater part of her life with her aunt. She was two years older than Roland, and she was a very beautiful young woman. A fragile-looking, aristocratic beauty, with a lofty kind of gracefulness in all her movements, and

with cold blue eyes that would have frozen the very soul of an aspiring young Lawrence. She was handsome, self-possessed, and accomplished; and Lady Anna Lansdell was never tired of sounding her praises. So young Roland, newly returned from Oxford, fell—or imagined himself to have fallen—desperately in love with her; and while his brief access of desperation lasted, the whole thing was arranged, and Mr. Lansdell found himself engaged.

He was engaged, and he was very much in love with his cousin. That two years' interval between their ages gave Gwendoline an immense advantage over her lover; she practised a thousand feminine coquetries upon this simple generous lad, and was proud of her power over him, and very fond of him after her own fashion, which was not a very warm one. She was by no means a woman to consider the world well lost for love. Her father had told her all about Roland's circumstances, and that the settlements would be very handsome. She was only sorry that poor Roland was a mere nobody, after all;

a country gentleman, who prided himself upon the length of his pedigree and the grandeur of his untitled race; but whose name looked very insignificant when you saw it at the tail of a string of dukes and marquises in the columns of the *Morning Post*.

But then he might distinguish himself in Parliament. There was something in that; and Lady Gwendoline brought all her power to bear upon the young man's career. She fanned the faint flames of his languid ambition with her own fiery breath. This girl, with her proud Saxon beauty, her cold blue eyes, her pale auburn hair, was as ardent and energetic as Joan of Arc or Elizabeth of England. She was a grand ambitious creature, and she wanted to marry a ruler, and to rule him; and she was discontented with her cousin because a crown did not drop on to his brows the moment he entered the arena. His speeches had been talked about; but, oh, what languid talk it had been! Gwendoline wanted all Europe to vibrate with the clamour of the name that was so soon to be her own.

At the end of his second session Roland went abroad with his dying mother. He came back alone, six weeks after his mother's death, and went straight to Gwendoline for consolation. He found her in deep mourning; all a-glitter with bracelets and necklaces of shining jet; looking very fair and stately in her trailing black robes; but he found her drawing-room filled with callers, and he left her wounded and angry. He thought her so much a part of himself, that he had expected to find her grief equal to his own. He went to her again, in a passionate outbreak of grief and anger; told her that she was cold-hearted and ungrateful, and that she had never loved the aunt who had been almost a mother to her. Lady Gwendoline was the last woman in the world to submit to any such reproof. She was astounded by her lover's temerity.

"I loved my aunt very dearly, Mr. Lansdell," she said; "so dearly that I could endure a great deal for her sake; but I can *not* endure the insolence of her son."

And then the Earl of Ruysdale's daughter

swept out of the room, leaving her cousin standing alone in a sunlit window, with the spring breezes blowing in upon him, and the shrill voice of a woman crying primroses sounding in the street below.

He went home, dispirited, disheartened, doubtful of himself, doubtful of Lady Gwendoline, doubtful of all the world; and early the next morning he received a letter from his cousin coolly releasing him from his engagement. The experience of yesterday had proved that they were unsuited to each other, she said; it was better that they should part now, while it was possible for them to part friends. Nothing could be more dignified or more decided than the dismissal.

Mr. Lansdell put the letter in his breast; the pretty perfumed letter, with the Ruysdale arms emblazoned on the envelope, the elegant lady-like letter, which recorded his sentence without a blot or a blister, without one uncertain line to mark where the hand had trembled. The hand may have trembled, nevertheless; for Lady Gwen-

doline was just the woman to write a dozen copies of her letter rather than send one that bore the faintest evidence of her weakness. Roland put the letter in his breast, and resigned himself to his fate. He was a great deal too proud to appeal against his cousin's decree; but he had loved her very sincerely, and if she had recalled him, he would have gone back to her and would have forgiven her. He lingered in England for a week or more after all the arrangements for his departure had been made; he lingered in the expectation that his cousin would recall him: but one morning, while he was sitting in the smoking-room at his favourite club, with his face hidden behind the pages of the *Post*, he burst into a harsh strident laugh.

"What the deuce is the matter with you, Lansdell?" asked a young man who had been startled by that sudden outbreak of unharmonious hilarity.

"Oh, nothing particular; I was looking at the announcement of my cousin Gwendoline's approaching marriage with the Marquis of Hea-

therland. I'm rejoiced to see that our family is getting up in the world."

"Oh, yes, that's been in the wind a long time," the lounger answered coolly. "Every body saw that Heatherland was very far gone six months ago. He's been mooning about your cousin ever since they met at The Bushes, Sir Francis Luxmoor's Leicestershire place. They used to say you were rather sweet in that quarter; but I suppose it was only a cousinly flirtation."

"Yes," said Mr. Lansdell, throwing down the paper, and taking out his cigar-case; "I suppose it was only what Gwendoline would call a flirtation. You see, I have been abroad six months attending the deathbed of my mother. I could scarcely expect to be remembered all that time. Will you give me a light for my cigar?"

The faces of the two young men were very close together as Roland lighted his cigar. Mr. Lansdell's pale-olive complexion had blanched a little, but his hand was quite steady, and he smoked half his Trabuco before he left the club-

room. The blow was sharp and unexpected, but Lady Gwendoline's lover bore it like a philosopher.

"I am unhappy because I have lost her," he thought: "but should I have been happy with her, if I had married her? Have I ever been happy in my life, or is there such a thing as happiness upon this unequally divided earth? I have played all my cards, and lost the game. Philanthropy, ambition, love, friendship—I have lost upon every one of them. It is time that I should begin to enjoy myself."

Thus it was that Mr. Lansdell accepted the Chiltern Hundreds, and turned his back upon a country in which he had never been especially happy. He had plenty of friends upon the Continent; and being rich, handsome, and accomplished, was fêted and caressed wherever he went. He was very much admired, and he might have been beloved; but that first disappointment had done its fatal work, and he did not believe that there was in all the world any such thing as pure and disinterested affection for a young man with a landed estate and fifteen thousand a-year.

So he lounged and dawdled away his time in drawing-rooms and boudoirs, on moonlit balconies, in shadowy orange-groves, beside the rippling Arno, in the colonnades of Venice, on the Parisian boulevards, under the lime-trees of Berlin, in any region where there was life and colour and gaiety, and the brightness of beautiful faces, and where a man of a naturally gloomy temperament might forget himself and be amused. He started with the intention of doing no harm; but with no better guiding principle than the intention to be harmless, a man can contrive to do a good deal of mischief.

Mr. Lansdell's life abroad was neither a good nor a useful one. It was an artificial kind of existence, with spurious pleasures, spurious brilliancy,—a life whose brightest moments but poorly compensated for the dismal reaction that followed them. And in the mean while Lady Gwendoline did not become Marchioness of Heatherland; for only a month before the day appointed for the wedding, young Lord Heatherland broke his neck in an Irish steeple-chase.

It was a terrible and bitter disappointment; but Lady Gwendoline showed her high breeding and her philosophy at the same time. She retired from the world in which her career had been hitherto so brilliantly successful, and bore her sorrow in silence. She, too, had played her best card, and had lost; and now that the Marquis was dead, and Roland Lansdell far away, people began to say that the lady had jilted her cousin, and that the loss of her titled lover was Heaven's special judgment upon her iniquity,—though why poor Lord Heatherland should be sacrificed to Lady Gwendoline Pomphrey's sin is rather a puzzling question.

It may be that Lord Ruysdale's daughter hoped her cousin would return when he heard of the Marquis's death. She knew that Roland had loved her: and what was more likely than that he should come back to her, now that he knew she was once more free to be his wife? Lady Gwendoline kept the secrets of her own heart, and no one knew which of her two lovers had been dearest to her. She kept her own

secrets; and by and by, when she reappeared in the world, people saw that her beauty had suffered very little from her sorrow for her disappointment.

She was still very handsome, but her prestige was gone. Impertinent young débutantes of eighteen called this splendid creature of four-and-twenty "quite old." Wasn't she engaged to a Mr. Lansdell ever so long ago, and then to the Marquis of Heatherland? Poor thing, how very sad! They wondered she did not go over to Rome, or join Miss Sellon's sisterhood, or something of that kind. Lady Gwendoline's portrait still held its place in books of beauty, and she could see herself smiling in West-end printshops, with a preternaturally high forehead, and ringlets down to her knees; but she felt that she was old—very old. Gossipping dowagers talked aristocratic scandal openly before her, and said, "We don't mind *your* hearing it, you know, Gwendoline dear;" and a woman has seen the last of her youth when people say that sort of thing to her.

She felt that she was very old. She had led a high-pressure kind of existence, in which a year stands for a decade; and now in her lonely old age she discovered that her father was very poor, and that his estates were mortgaged, and that henceforth her existence must be a wretched hand-to-mouth business, unless some distant relation, from whom Lord Ruysdale had expectations, would be good enough to die.

The distant relation had died within the last twelvemonth, and the fortune inherited from him, though by no means a large one, had set the Earl's affairs tolerably straight; so he had returned to Lowlands, after selling the lease and furniture of his town-house. It was absurd to keep the town-house any longer for the sake of Gwendoline, who was two-and-thirty years of age, and never likely to marry, Lord Ruysdale argued. So he had paid his debts, and had released his estate from some of its many incumbrances, and had come back to the home of his boyhood, to set up as a model farmer and country gentleman.

So, in the bright July sunshine, Gwendoline and her cousin lounged upon the lawn, and talked of old pleasures and old acquaintances, and the things that happened to them when they were young. If the lady ever cherished any hope that Roland would return to his allegiance, that hope has now utterly vanished. He has forgiven her for all the past, and they are friends and first-cousins again; but there is no room for hope that they can ever be again what they have been. A man who can forgive so generously must have long ceased to love: that strange madness, so nearly allied to hatred, and jealousy, and rage, and despair, has no kindred with forgiveness. Lady Gwendoline knew that her chance was gone. She knew this; and there was a secret bitterness in her heart when she thought of it, and she was jealous of her cousin's regard, and exacting in her manner to him. He bore it all with imperturbable good temper. He had been hot-headed and fiery-tempered long ago, when he was young and chivalrous, and eager to be useful to his fellow-creatures: but now he was

only a languid loiterer upon the earth, and his creed was the creed of the renowned American who has declared that "there is nothing new, and nothing true; and it don't signify."

What did it matter? The crooked sticks would never be straight: that which was wanting would never be numbered. Roland Lansdell suffered from a milder form of that disease in a wild paroxysm of which Swift wrote *Gulliver*, and Byron horrified society with *Don Juan*. He suffered from that moody desperation of mind which came upon Hamlet after his mother's wedding, and neither man nor woman delighted him.

But do not suppose that this young man gave himself melancholy or Byronic airs upon the strength of the aching void at his own weary heart. He was a sensible young man; and he did not pose himself *à la* Lara, or turn down his collars, or let his beard grow. He only took life very easily, and was specially indulgent to the follies and vices of people from whom he expected so very little.

He had gone back to Midlandshire because he was tired of his Continental wanderings; and now he was tired of Mordred already, before he had been back a week. Lady Gwendoline catechised him rather closely as to what he had done with himself upon the previous afternoon; and he told her very frankly that he had strolled into Hurstonleigh Grove to see Mr. Raymond, and had spent an hour or two talking with his old friend, while Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert and the children enjoyed themselves, and prepared a rustic tea, which would have been something like Watteau, if Watteau had been a Dutchman.

"It was very pretty, Gwendoline, I assure you," he said. "Mrs. Gilbert made tea, and we drank it in a scalding state; and the two children were all of a greasy radiance with bread-and-butter. The doctor seems to be an excellent fellow; his moral region is something tremendous, Raymond tells me, and he entertained us at tea with a most interesting case of fester."

"Oh, the doctor? that's Mr. Gilbert, is it not?" said Lady Gwendoline; "and what do

you think of his wife, Roland? You must have formed some opinion upon that subject, I should think, by the manner in which you stared at her."

"Did I stare at her?" cried Mr. Lansdell, with supreme carelessness. "I daresay I did; I always stare at pretty women. Why should a man go into all manner of stereotyped raptures about a Raffaelle or a Guido, and yet feel no honest thrill of disinterested admiration when he looks at a picture fresh from the hands of the supreme painter, Nature? who, by the way, makes as many failures, and is as often out of drawing, as any other artist. Yes, I admire Mrs. Gilbert, and I like to look at her. I don't suppose she's any better than other people, but she's a great deal prettier. A beautiful piece of animated wax-work, with a little machinery inside, just enough to make her say, 'Yes, if you please,' and 'No, thank you.' A lovely nonentity with yellow-black eyes. Did you observe her eyes?"

"No!" Lady Gwendoline answered sharply;

"I observed nothing except that she was a very dowdy-looking person. What, in heaven's name, is Mr. Raymond's motive for taking her up? He's always taking up some extraordinary person."

"But Mrs. Gilbert is not an extraordinary person; she's very stupid and commonplace. She was nursery-maid, or nursery-governess, or something of that kind, to that dear good Raymond's penniless nieces."

There was no more said about Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert. Lady Gwendoline did not care to talk about these common people, who came across her dull pathway, and robbed her of some few accidental rays of that light which was now the only radiance upon earth for her,—the light of her cousin's presence.

Ah, me! with what a stealthy step, invisible in the early sunshine, pitiless Nemesis creeps after us, and glides past us, and goes on before to wait for us upon the other side of the hill, amidst the storm-clouds and the darkness! From the very first Gwendoline had loved her cousin Roland better than any other living creature upon this

earth: but the chance of bringing down the bird at whose glorious plumage so many a fair fowler had levelled her rifle had dazzled and tempted her. The true wine of life was not that mawkish, sickly-sweet compound of rose-leaves and honey called Love, but an effervescing, intoxicating beverage known as Success, Lady Gwendoline thought: and in the triumph of her splendid conquest it seemed such an easy thing to resign the man she loved. But now it was all different. She looked back, and remembered what her life might have been: she looked forward, and saw what it was to be: and the face of Nemesis was very terrible to look upon.

Thus it was that Lady Gwendoline was exacting of her cousin's attention, impatient of his neglect. Oh, if she could have brought him back! if she could have kindled a new flame in the cold embers! Alas! she knew that to do that would be to achieve the impossible. She looked in the glass, and saw that her aristocratic beauty was pale and faded; she felt that the story of her life was ended. The sea might break

against the crags for ever and for ever; but the tender grace of a day that was dead could never return to her.

"He loved me once," she thought, as she sat in the summer twilight, watching her cousin strolling on the lawn, smoking his after-dinner cigar, and looking so tired — so tired of himself and every thing in the world. "He loved me once; it is something to remember that."

The day was very dull at Lowlands, Mr. Lansdell thought. There was a handsome house, a little old and faded, but very handsome notwithstanding; and there was a well-cooked dinner, and good wines; and there was an elegant and accomplished woman always ready to talk to him and amuse him;—and yet, somehow, it was all flat, stale, and unprofitable to this young man, who had lived the same kind of life for ten years, and had drained its pleasures to the very dregs. It was all weary, flat, stale, unprofitable: because the soul of man cannot be satisfied in a state of sin: and a purposeless idle existence *is* a state of sin. Mr. Lansdell did not

believe this. He recognised no higher standard for his actions than the common standard of man's morality; and judging himself by that standard, he fancied that he had done well enough. He had done his best, and had failed ignominiously, and had won the right to be idle ever after that failure.

"We should laugh at a man who went on writing epic poems all his life, though people refused to read a line of his poetry; and no man can be expected to go on trying to improve the position of people who don't want to be improved. I've tried my hand at the working-man, and he has rejected me as an intrusive nuisance. I've no doubt he was 'in his right.' How should I like a reformer who wanted to set *me* straight, and lay out my leisure-hours by line and rule, and spend my money for me, and show me how to get mild Turkish, and German wines, in the best and cheapest market?"

Mr. Lansdell often thought about his life. It is not natural that a man, originally well disposed, should lead a bad and useless life without think-

ing of it. Mr. Lansdell was subject to gloomy fits of melancholy, in which the Present seemed a burden, and the Future a blank, — a great blank desert, or a long dreary bridge, like that which the genius showed to Mirza in his morning vision, with dreadful pitfalls every here and there, down which unwary foot-passengers sank, engulfed in the dreadful blackness of a bottomless ocean.

Alas for Roland Lansdell! he could see no further shore, no sunny slopes or gleaming cliffs, beyond that dreadful ocean. There was the terrible agony of the plunge, and then there was no more. He thought this, and his life seemed dreary to him because of this. To what end were the brief pleasures of an existence which at any moment might come to a sudden end, like the shutting of a black door upon a sunlit chamber? Who could deem love a blessing, when at any moment the fond eyes might grow dim, the tender voice might fail, the gentle hand might loose its loving grasp for ever and for ever? For ever! There was no hope for this young man, who saw

miracles performed every day upon this earth, who beheld death and resurrection for ever exemplified in a thousand common shapes, and yet could not believe that a Creator, who had implanted in every soul a universal yearning for a life beyond the grave, might, in His bountiful mercy, appoint a spring-time of resurrection for man as well as for the lilies of the field.

CHAPTER II.

UNDER LORD THURSTON'S OAK.

While Mr. Lansdell remembered Isabel Gilbert as a pretty automaton, who had simpered and blushed when he spoke to her, and stammered shyly when she was called upon to answer him, the Doctor's Wife walked up and down the flat commonplace garden at Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne, and thought of her birthday afternoon, whose simple pleasures had been embellished by the presence of a demigod. Yes, she walked up and down between two rows of straggling gooseberry-bushes, in a rapturous day-dream; a dangerous day-dream, in which Roland Lansdell's dark face shone dazzling and beautiful. Was it wrong to think of him? She never asked herself that question. She had read sentimental books all her life, and had been passionately in

love with heroes in three volumes, ever since she could remember. What did it matter whether she was in love with Sir Reginald Glanville or Mr. Roland Lansdell? One passion was as hopeless as the other, and as harmless therefore. She was never likely to see the lord of Mordred Priory again. Had she not heard him tell Mr. Raymond that he should spend the winter in Paris? Mrs. Gilbert counted the months upon her fingers. Was November the winter? If so, Mr. Lansdell would be gone in four months' time. And in all those four months what likelihood was there that she should see him,—she, who was such a low degraded wretch as compared with this splendid being and those with whom it was his right to associate? Never, no, never until now had she understood the utter hideousness and horror of her life. The square miserable parlour, with little stunted cupboards on each side of the fireplace, and shells and peacock's feathers, and penny bottles of ink, and dingy unpaid bills, upon the mantelpiece. She sat there with the July sun glaring in upon her through the yellow-white

blind; she sat there and thought of her life and its squalid ugliness, and then thought of Lady Gwendoline at Lowlands, and rebelled against the hardness of a Providence that had not made her an earl's daughter. And then she clasped her hands upon her face, and shut out the vulgar misery of that odious parlour—a *parlour!*—the very word was unknown in those bright regions of which she was always dreaming—and thought of Roland Lansdell.

She thought of him, and she thought what her life might have been—if—

If what? If any one out of a hundred different visions, all equally childish and impossible, could have been realised. If she had been an earl's daughter, like Lady Gwendoline. If she had been a great actress, and Roland Lansdell had seen her and fallen in love with her from a stage-box. If he had met her in the Walworth Road two or three years ago; she fancied the meeting,—he in a cab, with the reins lightly held between the tips of his gloved fingers, and a tiny tiger swinging behind; and she standing on

the curbstone waiting to cross the road, and not out to fetch any thing vulgar, only going to pay a water-rate, or to negotiate some mysterious "backing" of the spoons, or some such young-ladylike errand. And then she got up and went to the looking-glass to see if she really was pretty; or if her face, as she saw it in her day-dreams, was only an invention of her own, like the scenery and the dresses of those foolish dreams. She rested her elbows on the mantelpiece, and looked at herself, and pushed her hair about, and experimented with her mouth and eyes, and tried to look like Edith Dombey in the grand Carker scene, and acted the scene in a whisper.

No, she wasn't a bit like Edith Dombey; she was more like Juliet, or Desdemona. She lowered her eyelids, and then lifted them slowly, revealing a tender penetrating glance in the golden black eyes.

"I'm *very* sorry that you are not well!"

she whispered. Yes, she would do for Desdemona. Oh, if instead of marrying George Gilbert, she had only run away to London, and gone

straight to that enterprising manager, who would have been so sure to engage her! If she had done this, she might have played Desdemona, and Mr. Lansdell might have happened to go to the theatre, and might have fallen desperately in love with her on the spot.

She took a dingy volume of the immortal William's from a dusty row of books on one of the cupboards, and went up to her room and locked the door, and pleaded for Cassio, and wept and protested opposite the looking-glass, before which three matter-of-fact generations of Gilberts had shaved themselves.

She was only nineteen, and she was a child, with all a child's eagerness for something bright and happy. It seemed only a very short time since she had longed for a gaily-dressed doll that adorned one of the Walworth-Road shop-windows. Her married life had not as yet invested her with any matronly dignity. She had no domestic cares or duties; for the simple household was kept in order by Mrs. Jeffson, who would have resented any interference from the young mistress. Isabel

went into the kitchen sometimes, when she was very much at a loss as to what she should do with herself, and sat in an old rocking-chair swinging languidly backwards and forwards, and watching kind-hearted Tilly making a pie.

There are some young women who take kindly to a simple domestic life, and have a natural genius for pies and puddings, and cutting and contriving, in a cheery, pleasant way, that invests poverty with a grace of its own; and when a gentleman wishes to marry on three hundred a year, he should look out for one of those bright household fairies. Isabel had no liking for these things; to her the making of pastry was a wearisome business. It was all very well for Ruth Pinch to do it for once in a way, and to be admired by John Westlock, and marry a rich and handsome young husband in next to no time. No doubt Miss Pinch knew instinctively that Mr. Westlock would come that morning while the beef-steak pudding was in progress. But to go on making puddings for Tom Pinch for ever and ever, with no John Westlock! Isabel left the

house affairs to Mrs. Jeffson, and acted Shakespearian heroines and Edith Dombey before her looking-glass, and read her novels, and dreamed her dreams, and wrote little scraps of poetry, and drew pen-and-ink profile portraits of Mr. Lansdell —always looking from right to left. She gave him very black eyes with white blanks in the centre, and streaky hair; she drew Lady Gwendoline and the chip-bonnet also very often, if not quite as often as the gentleman; so there was no harm in it. Mrs. Gilbert was strictly punctilious with herself, even in the matter of her thoughts. She only thought of what *might* have happened if Mr. Lansdell had met her long ago before her marriage.

It is not to be supposed that she forgot Roland's talk of some picnic or entertainment at Mordred. She thought of it a great deal, sometimes fancying that it was too bright a thing to come to pass: at other times thinking that Mr. Lansdell was likely to call at any moment with a formal invitation for herself and her husband.

The weather was very warm just now, and the roads very dusty; so Mrs. Gilbert stayed at home a good deal. He might come,—he might come at any unexpected moment. She trembled and turned hot at the sound of a double knock, and ran to the glass to smoothe her disordered hair: but only the most commonplace visitors came to Mr. Gilbert's mansion; and Isabel began to think that she would never see Roland Lansdell again.

And then she plunged once more into the hot-pressed pages of the Alien, and read Mr. Lansdell's plaints, on toned paper, with long *s*'s that looked like *f*'s. And she copied his verses, and translated them into bad French. They were very difficult: how was she to render even such a simple sentence as "My own Clotilde?" She tried such locutions as "*Ma propre Clotilde*," "*Ma Clotilde particulière*;" but she doubted if they were quite academically correct. And she set the Alien to tunes that he didn't match, and sang him in a low voice to the cracked notes of an old harpsichord which George's mother had imported from Yorkshire.

One day when she was walking with George, - one dreary afternoon, when George had less to do than usual, and was able to take his wife for a nice dusty walk on the high-road,—Mrs. Gilbert saw the man of whom she had thought so much. She saw a brown horse and a well-dressed rider sweep past her in a cloud of dust: and she knew, when he had gone by, that he was Roland Lansdell. He had not seen her any more than if there was no such creature upon this earth. He had not seen her. For the last five weeks she had been thinking of him perpetually, and he rode by and never saw that she was there. No doubt Lord Byron would have passed her by in much the same manner if he had lived: and would have ridden on to make a morning call upon that thrice-blessed Italian woman, whose splendid shame it was to be associated with him. Was it not always so? The moon is a cold divinity, and the brooks look up for ever and win no special radiance in recompense for their faithful worship: the sunflower is always turning to the sun, and the planet takes very little notice of

the flower. Did not Napoleon snub Madame de Staël? And if Isabel could have lived thirty years earlier, and worked her passage out to St. Helena as ship's needle-woman, or something of that kind, and expressed her intention of sitting at the exile's feet for the rest of her natural life, the hero would have doubtless sent her back by the first homeward-bound vessel with an imperially proportioned flea in her ear.

No, she must be content to worship after the manner of the brooks. No subtle power of sympathy was engendered out of her worship. She drew rather fewer profile views of Mr. Lansdell after that wretched dusty afternoon, and she left off hoping that he would call and invite her to Mordred.

She resumed her old habits, and went out again with Shelley and the Alien, and the big green parasol.

One day — one never-to-be-forgotten day, which made a kind of chasm in her life, dividing all the past from the present and the future—she sat on her old seat under the great oak-tree, be-

side the creaking mill-wheel and the plashing water; she sat in her favourite spot, with Shelley on her lap and the green parasol over her head. She had been sitting there for a long time in the drowsy midday atmosphere, when a great dog came up to her, and stared at her, and snuffed at her hands, and made friendly advances to her; and then another dog, bigger, if any thing, than the first, came bouncing over a stile and bounding towards her; and then a voice, whose sudden sound made her drop her book all confused and frightened, cried, "Hi, Frollo! this way, Frollo." And in the next minute a gentleman, followed by a third dog, came along the narrow bridge that led straight to the bench on which she was sitting.

Her parasol had fallen back as she stooped to pick up her book, and Roland Lansdell could not avoid seeing her face. He thought her very pretty, as we know, but he thought her also very stupid; and he had clean forgotten his talk about her coming to Mordred.

"Let me pick up the book, Mrs. Gilbert," he said. "What a pretty place you have chosen for

your morning's rest! This is a favourite spot of mine." He looked at the open pages of the book as he handed it to her, and saw the title; and glancing at another book on the seat near her, he recognised the familiar green cover and beveled edges of the Alien. A man always knows the cover of his own book, especially when the work has hung rather heavily on the publisher's hands.

"You are fond of Shelley," he said. (He was considerably surprised to find that this pretty nonentity beguiled her morning walks with the perusal of the *Revolt of Islam.*)

"Oh, yes, I am very, very fond of him. Wasn't it a pity that he was drowned!"

She spoke of that calamity as if it had been an event of the last week or two. These things *were* nearer to her than all that common business of breakfast and dinner and supper which made up her daily life. Mr. Lansdell shot a searching glance at her from under cover of his long lashes. "Was this feminine affectation, provincial Rosa-Matilda-ism, or what?"

"Yes, it was a pity," he said; "but I fancy

we're beginning to get over the misfortune. And so you like all that dreamy, misty stuff?" he added, pointing to the open book which Isabel held in her hands. She was turning the leaves about, with her eyes cast down upon the pages. So would she have sat, shy and trembling, if Sir Reginald Glanville, or Eugene Aram, or the Giaour, or Napoleon the Great, or any other grand melancholy creature, could have been conjured into life and planted by her side. But she could not tolerate the substantive "stuff" as applied to the works of the lamented Percy Bysshe Shelley.

"I think it is the most beautiful *poetry* that was ever written," she said.

"Better than Byron's?" asked Mr. Lansdell. "I thought most young ladies made Byron their favourite."

"Oh, yes, I love Byron. But then he makes one so unhappy, because one feels that *he* was so unhappy when he wrote. Fancy his writing the *Giaour* late at night, after being out at parties, where every body adored him; and if he hadn't

written it, he would have gone mad," said Mrs. Gilbert, opening her eyes very wide. "Reading Shelley's poetry seems like being amongst birds and flowers and blue rippling water and summer. It always seems summer in his poetry. Oh, I don't know which I like best!"

Was all this affectation, or was it only simple childish reality? Mr. Lansdell was so much given to that dreadful disease, disbelief, that he was slow to accept even the evidence of those eloquent blushes, the earnest shining light in those wonderful eyes, which could scarcely be assumed at will, however skilled in the light comedy of everyday life Mrs. Gilbert might be. The dogs, who had no misanthropical tendencies, had made friends with Izzie already, and had grouped themselves about her, and laid their big paws and cold wet noses on her knee.

"Shall I take them away?" asked Mr. Lansdell. "I am afraid they will annoy you."

"Oh, no, indeed; I am so fond of dogs."

She bent over them and caressed them with her ungloved hands, and dropped Shelley again,

and was ashamed of her awkwardness. Would Edith Dombey have been perpetually dropping things? She bent over a big black retriever till her lips touched his forehead, and he was emboldened to flap his great slimy tongue over her face in token of his affection. *His* dog! Yes, it had come to that already. Mr. Lansdell was that awful being, the mysterious "Lui" of a thousand romances. Roland had been standing upon the bridge all this time; but the bridge was very narrow, and as a labouring man came across at this moment with a reaping-hook across his shoulders, Mr. Lansdell had no choice except to go away or else sit down on the bench under the tree. So he sat down at a respectful distance from Mrs. Gilbert, and picked up Shelley again; and I think, if it had not been for the dogs, Isabel would have been likely to drop over into the brawling mill-stream in the intensity of her confusion.

He was there by her side, a real living hero and poet, and her weak sentimental little heart swelled with a romantic rapture; and yet she

felt that she ought to go away and leave him. Another woman might have looked at her watch, and exclaimed at the lateness of the hour, and gathered up her books and parasol, and departed with a sweeping curtsey and a dignified adieu to Mr. Lansdell. But Isabel was planted to the spot, held by some fearful but delicious charm,—a magic and a mystic spell,—with which the plashing of the water and the slow creaking of the mill-wheel, and a faint fluttering of leaves and flowers, the drowsy buzz of multitudinous insects, the thrilling song of Shelley's own sky-lark in the blue heaven high above her head, blended in one sweet confusion.

I acknowledge that all this was very hard upon the honest-hearted parish-doctor, who was at this moment sitting in the faint atmosphere of a cottage chamber, applying fresh layers of cotton wool to the poor tortured arm of a Sunday-school pupil, who had been all but burnt to death in the previous week. But then, if a man chooses to marry a girl because her eyes are black and large and beautiful, he must be contented with

the supreme advantage he derives from the special attribute for which he has chosen her: and so long as she does not become a victim to cataract, or aggravated inflammation of the eyelids, or chronic sty, he has no right to complain of his bargain. If he selects his wife from amongst other women because she is true-hearted and high-minded and trustworthy, he has ample right to be angry with her whenever she ceases to be any one of these things.

Mr. Lansdell and his dogs lingered for some considerable time under the shadow of the big oak. The dogs were rather impatient, and gave expression to their feelings by sundry yawns that were like half-stifled howls, and by eager pantings, and sudden and purposeless leaps, and short broken-off yelps or snaps; but Roland Lansdell was in no hurry to leave the region of Thurston's Crag. Mrs. Gilbert was not stupid, after all; she was something better than a pretty waxen image, animated by limited machinery. That pretty head was filled with a quaint confusion of ideas, half-formed childish fancies, which charmed

and amused this elegant loiterer, who had lived in a world where all the women were clever and accomplished, and able to express all they thought, and a good deal more than they thought, with the clear precision and self-possession of creatures who were thoroughly convinced of the infallibility of their own judgment. Yes, Mr. Lansdell was amused by Isabel's talk; and he led her on very gently, till her shyness vanished, and she dared to look up at his face as she spoke to him; and he attuned his own talk to the key of hers, and wandered with her in the Valhalla of her heroes, from Eugene Aram to Napoleon Buonaparte. But in the midst of all this, she looked all in a hurry at the little silver watch that George had given her, and found that it was past three.

"Oh, I must go, if you please," she said; "I have been out ever since eleven o'clock, and we dine at half-past four."

"Let me carry your books a little way for you, then," said Mr. Lansdell.

"But are you going that way?"

"Yes, that is the very way I am going."

The dogs were all excitement at the prospect of a move; they barked and careered about Isabel, and rushed off as if they were going to run ten miles at a stretch, and then wheeled round with alarming suddenness and flew back to Mrs. Gilbert and their master.

The nearest way to Graybridge lay across all that swelling sea of lovely meadow-land, and there were a good many stiles to be crossed and gates to be opened and shut, so the walk occupied some time; and Mr. Lansdell must have had business to transact in the immediate neighbourhood of Graybridge, for he walked all the way through those delicious meadows, and only parted with Isabel at a gate that opened into the high-road near the entrance of the town.

"I suppose you often stroll as far as Thurston's Crag?" Mr. Lansdell said.

"Oh, yes, very often. It isn't too long a walk, and it is *so* pretty."

"It is pretty. Mordred is quite as near to you, though, and I think that you would like

the gardens at Mordred; there are ruins, you know, and it's altogether very romantic. I will give you and Mr. Gilbert a key, if you would like to come there sometimes. Oh, by the by, I hope you haven't forgotten your promise to come to luncheon and see the pictures, and all that sort of thing."

No, Isabel had not forgotten; her face flushed suddenly at the thought of this rapturous vista opening before her. She was to see *him* again, once more, in his own house, and then—and then it would be November, and he would go away, and she would never see him again. No, Isabel had not forgotten; but until this moment all recollection of that invitation to the Priory had been blotted out of Mr. Lansdell's mind. It flashed back upon him quite suddenly now, and he felt that he had been unduly neglectful of these nice simple-hearted Gilberts, in whom his dear good Raymond was so much interested.

"I daresay you are fond of pictures?" he said interrogatively.

"Oh, yes, I am very, very fond of them."

This was quite true. She was fond of every thing that was beautiful,—ready to admire every thing with ignorant childish enthusiasm,—pictures, and flowers, and fountains, and moonlit landscapes, and wonderful foreign cities, and every thing upon this earth that was romantic, and different from her own life.

"Then will you ask Mr. Gilbert to accept an unceremonious invitation, and to bring you to the Priory to luncheon,—say next Tuesday, as that will give me time to invite my cousin Gwendoline, and your old friend Mr. Raymond, and the two little girls who are so fond of you?"

Isabel murmured something to the effect that she would be very happy, and she was sure her husband would be very happy. She thought that no creature in the world could be otherwise than enraptured by such an invitation: and then she began to think of what she would wear, and to remember that there were greasy streaks and patches upon her brown-silk wedding-dress, which was the best and richest garment her wardrobe contained. Oh, if George would only give her

a pale pearly-coloured silk that she had seen in a shop-window at Murlington, and a black-lace shawl, and white bonnet, and pearly gloves and boots and parasol to match the dress! There were people in the world rich enough to have all these things, she thought,—thrice-blessed creatures, who always walked in silk attire.

Mr. Lansdell begged her to write him a line to say if Tuesday would suit Mr. Gilbert. They were at the last gate by this time, and he lifted his hat with one hand while he held out the other to Isabel. She touched it very lightly, with fingers that trembled a little at the thrilling contact. Her gloves were rolled up in a little ball in her pocket. She was at an age when gloves are rather a nuisance than otherwise; it is only when women come to years of discretion that they are learned as to the conflicting merits of Houbigant and Piver.

"Good-by. I shall see Gwendoline this afternoon; and I shall rely upon you for Tuesday. Hi, Frollo, Quasimodo, Caspar!"

He was gone, with his dogs and a cloud of

dust about his heels. Even the dust imparted a kind of grandeur to him. He seemed a being who appeared and disappeared in a cloud, after the manner of some African genii.

Graybridge-church clock chimed the half-hour after four, and Mrs. Gilbert hurried home, and went into the common parlour, where dinner was laid, with her face a little flushed, and her dress dusty. George was there already, whistling very loudly, and whittling a stick with a big knobby-handled clasp-knife.

"Why, Izzie," he said, "what *have* you been doing with yourself?"

"*Oh*, George!" exclaimed Mrs. Gilbert, in a tone of mingled triumph and rapture, "I have met Mr. Lansdell, and he was *so* polite, and he stopped and talked to me *ever* so long; and we're to go there on Tuesday, and Lady Gwendoline Pomphrey is to be there to meet us,—only think of that!"

"Where?" cried George.

"Why, at Mordred Priory, of course. We're to go to luncheon; and, oh, George, remember

you must never call it 'lunch.' And I'm to write and say if you'll go; but *of course* you will go, George."

"Humph!" muttered Mr. Gilbert reflectively; "Tuesday's an awkward day, rather. But still, as you say, Izzie, it's a splendid connexion, and a man oughtn't to throw away such a chance of extending his practice. Yes, I think I'll manage it, my dear. You may write to say we'll go."

And this was all; no rapture, no spark of enthusiasm. To tell the truth, the surgeon was hungry, and wanted his dinner. It came in presently, smelling very savoury,—but, oh, so vulgar! It was Irish stew,—a low horrid dinner, such as Hibernian labourers might devour after a day's bricklaying. Isabel ate very little, and picked out all the bits of onion and put them aside on her plate. Come what might, she would never, never eat onions again. *That* degradation, at least, it was in her own power to avoid.

After dinner, while George was busy in the surgery, Mrs. Gilbert set to work to compose her

letter to Mr. Lansdell. She was to write to him —to him! It was to be only a ceremonious letter, very brief and commonplace: "Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert present their compliments to Mr. Lansdell, and will be happy to" &c. &c. But even such a letter as this was a critical composition. In that sublime region in which Mr. Lansdell lived, there might be certain words and phrases that were indispensable,—there might be some arbitrary mode of expression, not to know which would argue yourself unknown. Isabel looked into *Dombey*, but there was no help for her there. She would have been very glad if she could have found "Mrs. Grainger presents her compliments to Mr. Dombey," or "Miss F. Dombey has the pleasure to inform Mr. Gay—" or something of that kind, any where amongst those familiar pages. However, she was obliged to write her letter as best she might, on a sheet of paper that was very thick and slippery, and strongly impregnated with patchouli; and she sealed the envelope with a profile of Lord Byron imprinted upon white wax,—the only stick that

was to be had in Graybridge, and to find which good-natured Mr. Jeffson scoured the town, while Isabell was writing her letter.

Roland Lansdell, Esq^re.

Mordred Priory.

To write such an address was in itself a pleasure. It was dark by the time Mrs. Gilbert had finished her letter, and then she began to think of her dress,—her dress for Tuesday,—the Tuesday which was henceforth to stand out from amongst all the other days in her life.

Would George give her a new silk dress? No; that was impossible. He would give her a sovereign, and she might "do up" the old one. She was fain to be content, and thankful for so much; and she went upstairs with a candle, and came down presently with two or three dresses on her arm. Among them there was a white muslin, a good deal the worse for wear, but prettier than the silk; a soft transparent fabric, and with lace about it. Mrs. Gilbert determined upon wearing this dress; and early the next morning she went out and consulted with a little dressmaker, and

brought the young woman home with her, and sat down with her in the sunny parlour to unpick and refashion and improve this white-muslin robe. She told the dressmaker that she was going on a visit to Mordred Priory, and by nightfall almost every body in Graybridge knew that Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert had received an invitation from Mr. Lansdell.

CHAPTER III.

ROLAND SAYS, "AMEN."

Isabel had met Mr. Lansdell on Thursday; and by Saturday night all her preparations were made, and the white dress, and a white-muslin mantle to match it, were in the hands of Mrs. Jeffson, who was to get them up in the highest style of clear-starching. The sovereign had done a great deal. Isabel had bought a new ribbon for her straw-hat, and a pair of pale straw-coloured gloves, and all manner of small matters necessary to the female toilette upon gala occasions. And now that every thing was done, the time between Saturday night and Tuesday lay all before them,—a dreary blank, that must be endured somehow or other. I should be ashamed to say how very little of the Rector's sermon Isabel heard on Sunday morning. She was thinking of Mordred Priory all the time she

was in church, and the beautiful things that Mr. Lansdell would say to her, and the replies that she would make. She imagined it all, as it was her habit to do.

And on this summer Sunday, this blessed day of quiet and repose, when there was no sound of the sickle in the corn-fields, and only the slow drip, drip, drip of the water-drops from the motionless mill-wheel at Thurston's Crag, Roland Lansdell lounged all day in the library at Mordred Priory, reading a little, writing a little, smoking and pondering a great deal. What should he do with himself? That was the grand question which this young man found himself very often called upon to decide. He would stop at Mordred till he was tired of Mordred, and then he would go to Paris; and when he was weary of that brilliant city, whose best delights familiarity had rendered indifferent to him, he would go Rhine-ward, over all the old ground again, amongst all the old people. Ten years is a very long time when you have fifteen thousand a-year and nothing particular to do with yourself

or your money. Roland Lansdell had used up all the delights of civilised Europe; and the pleasures that seemed so freshly effervescent to other men were to him as champagne that has grown flat and vapid in the unemptied glasses on a deserted banquet-table.

He sat to-day in the great window of the library—a deeply-embayed Tudor window, jutting out upon a broad stone terrace, along whose balustrade a peacock stalked slowly in the sunshine. There were books on either side of the window; solid ranges of soberly-bound volumes, that reached from floor to ceiling on every side of the room; for the Lansdells had been a studious and book-learned race time out of mind, and the library at Mordred was worthy of its name.

There was only one picture—a portrait by Rembrandt, framed in a massive border of carved oak—above the high chimney-piece; a grave grand face, with solemn eyes that followed you wherever you went; a splendid earnest face, with the forehead mysteriously shadowed by the broad brim of a steeple-crowned hat.

In the dark melancholy of that sombre countenance there was some vague resemblance to the face of the young man lounging in the sunny window this afternoon, smoking and pondering, and looking up now and then to call to the peacock on the balustrade.

Beyond that balustrade there was a fair domain, bounded far away by a battlemented wall; a lofty ivy-mantled wall, propped every here and there with mighty buttresses; a wall that had been built in the days when William of Normandy enriched his faithful followers with the fairest lands of his newly-conquered realm. Beyond that grand old boundary arose the square turret of the village church, coeval with the oldest part of Mordred Priory. The bells were swinging in the turret now, and the sound of them floated towards Roland Lansdell as he lounged in the open window.

"Only thirty years of age," he thought; "and how long it seems since I sat on my mother's knee in the shadowy, sleepy old pew yonder, and heard the vicar's voice humming under the sounding-

board above our heads! Thirty years—thirty profitless, tiresome years; and there is not a reaper in the fields, or a shock-headed country lad that earns sixpence a day by whooping to the birds amongst the corn, that is not of more use to his fellow-creatures than I am. I suppose though, at the worst, I'm good for trade. And I try my best not to do any harm—Heaven knows I don't want to do any harm."

It must have been a strange transition of ideas that at this moment led Mr. Lansdell to think of that chance meeting with the doctor's dark-eyed wife under the dense foliage of Lord Thurston's oak.

"She's a pretty creature," he thought; "a pretty, inexperienced, shy little creature. Just the sort of woman that a hardened profligate or a *roué* would try to pervert and entangle. There's something really bewitching in all that enthusiastic talk about Byron and Shelley. 'What a pity he was drowned!' and, 'Oh! if he had only fought for Greece, and been victorious, like Leonidas, you know,'—poor little thing! I wonder how

much she knows about Leonidas?—'how splendid that would have been! but, oh, to think that he should have a fever—a fever just such as kills common people—and die, just when he had proved himself so great and noble!' It's the newest thing to find all these silly school-girl fancies confusing the brain of a woman who ought to be the most practical person in Graybridge,—a parish-surgeon's wife, who should not, according to the fitness of things, have an idea above coarse charity flannels and camomile-tea and gruel. How she will open her eyes when she sees this room, and all the books in it! Poor little thing! I shall never forget what a pretty picture she made sitting under the oak, with the greenish gray of the great knotted trunk behind her, and the blue water in the foreground."

And then Mr. Lansdell's ideas, which seemed especially irrelevant this afternoon, broke off abruptly. "I hope I may never do any harm," he thought. "I am not a good man, or a useful man; but I don't think I have ever done much harm."

He lit another cigar, and strolled out upon the terrace, and from the terrace to the great quadrangular stable-yard. Upon one side of the quadrangle there was a cool arched way that had once been a cloister; and I regret to say that the stone cells in which the monks of Mordred had once spent their slow quiet days and meditative nights now did duty as loose-boxes for Mr. Lansdell's hunters. Openings had been knocked through the dividing walls; for horses are more socially-disposed creatures than monks, and are apt to pine and sicken if entirely deprived of companionship with their kind. Roland went into three or four of the boxes, and looked at the horses, and sighed for the time when the hunting-season should commence and Midlandshire might be tolerable.

"I want occupation," he thought, "physical wear and tear, and all that sort of thing. I let my mind run upon all manner of absurd things for want of occupation."

He yawned and threw away his cigar, and strode across the yard towards the open window

of a harness-room, at which a man was sitting in his shirt-sleeves, and with a Sunday paper before him.

"You may bring the Diver round in half an hour, Christie," said Mr. Lansdell; "I shall ride over to Conventford this afternoon."

"Yes, sir."

Roland Lansdell did ride to Conventford; galloping his hardest into Waverly, to the scandal of the sober townspeople, who looked up from their tea-tables half scared at the sound of the clattering hoofs upon the uneven pavement; and then dawdling at a foot-pace all along the avenue which extends in unbroken beauty from Waverly to Conventford. The streets of this latter town were crowded with gaily-dressed factory-girls, and the bells from three separate spires were clanging loudly in the summer air. Mr. Lansdell rode very slowly, thinking of "all manner of absurd things" as he went along; and he entered Mr. Raymond's pretty drawing-room at Oakbank just in time to catch that gentleman drinking tea with the orphans.

Of course Roland had forgotten that his friend dined at an early hour on Sundays, and he had come to dine; but it wasn't of the least consequence, he would have some tea; yes, and cold beef, by all means, if there was cold beef.

A side-table was laid for him, and a great sirloin was brought in. But Mr. Lansdell did not make much havoc with the joint. He and Mr. Raymond had a good deal to say to each other: and Mr. Lansdell took very kindly to the orphans, and asked them a good many questions about their studies, and their present governess, who was a native of Conventford, and had gone out that evening to drink tea with her friends: and then, somehow or other, the conversation rambled on to their late governess, Isabel Sleaford, and the orphans had a great deal to say about her. She was so nice, and she told them such pretty things: *Eugene Aram* and the *Giaour*—how wicked Black Hassan was to tie his poor 'sister' up in a sack and drown her, because he didn't wish her to marry the Giaour! Miss Sleaford had modified the romantic story in deference to the tender ages

of her pupils. Yes, the young ladies said, they loved Miss Sleaford *dearly*. She was *so nice;* and sometimes, at night, when they begged her very, very hard, she would ACT (the orphans uttered this last word in an awfully distinct whisper); and, oh, that was beautiful! She would do Hamlet and the Ghost: when she stood one way, with a black-velvet cloak over her shoulder, she was Hamlet; when she stood the other way, with a mahogany ruler in her hand, she was the Ghost. And she acted the Ghost so beautifully, that sometimes they were frightened, and wouldn't go outside the schoolroom-door without a candle, and somebody's hand to hold—tight.

And then Mr. Raymond laughed, and told Roland what he thought of Isabel, phrenologically and otherwise.

"Poor little thing! I think there must be something sad about the story of her early life," he said; "for she so evidently shrinks from all allusion to it. It's the old story, I suppose,—an unkind stepmother and an uncomfortable home. Under these circumstances, I was very

glad to see her married to a well-disposed, honest-hearted young man."

"She was very fond of Mr. Gilbert, I suppose, —very much in love with him?" said Roland, after a little pause.

"In love with him! not a bit of it. She was very fond of him, I daresay — not in the sentimental manner in which she discourses about her poets and her heroes; but she has every reason to be fond of him as a faithful protector and a good friend."

Mr. Raymond looked up suddenly, and fixed his eyes upon the face of his young kinsman. But it was dusk by this time; and in the dim light of the room Charles Raymond could not see the expression of Roland's face; he could only see the attitude of his head, which drooped a little forward, supported by his hand.

"I lent my voice to the bringing about of Isabel Gilbert's marriage," Mr. Raymond said slowly; "and God grant that no man may ever be base enough or cruel enough to interpose himself between those two!"

"Amen!" answered Roland Lansdell, in a deep solemn voice.

And then he walked to the window and looked out into the twilit garden, above which the faint summer moon had newly arisen.

"If I could have believed in that splendid fable of a future life, that grand compensating balance for all the sorrows and mistakes of this lower world, what a good man I might have been!" he thought, as he stood there looking out, with his arm resting upon the broad wooden sash, and his head upon his arm.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. LANSDELL RELATES AN ADVENTURE.

The Tuesday was a fine day. The August sunshine—the beautiful harvest-time sunshine which was rejoicing the hearts of all the farmers in Midlandshire—awoke Mrs. Gilbert very early. She was going to Mordred Priory. For once she forgot to notice the ugliness of the shabby furniture, the bare whitewashed walls upon which her eyes opened. She was going to Mordred Priory. There are moments in our lives in which all the great expanse of the past and future seems as nothing compared with the consummate felicity of the present. It was very early; but not too early for her to get up, Mrs. Gilbert thought. She seated herself before the little glass at the open window, and brushed her long black hair; while the birds twittered and shook themselves in the sunshine, and the faint lowing of cattle came like a long drowsy murmur from the distant fields.

The surgeon and his wife had held solemn conference with each other as to the hour at which they ought to arrive at Mordred Priory. Luncheon might be eaten at any time from one until three, Mr. Gilbert said; and it was decided, therefore, that they should present themselves at the gates of the Priory a short time before one o'clock.

How pretty the village of Mordred looked in the sleepy August atmosphere, the hazy, Cuyp-like sunshine! How beautiful every thing looked just at the entrance to the village, where there was a long straggling inn with a top-heavy roof, all dotted over with impossible little windows, a dear old red-tiled roof, with pouters and fantails brooding and cooing to themselves in the sunshine, and yellow stone-crop creeping here and there in patches of gold! To the right of the inn a shady road led away below the walls of the Priory to the square-turreted church; and, grander than the church itself, the lofty gates of Mordred dominated over all.

Isabel almost trembled as Mr. Gilbert got out

of the gig and pulled the iron ring that hung at the end of a long chain on one side of those formidable oaken gates. It seemed like ringing at the door of the past, somehow; and the Doctor's Wife half expected to see quaintly-costumed servants, with long points to their shoes and strange parti-coloured garments, and a jester with a cap and bells, when those great gates were opened. But the person who opened the gates was only a very harmless old woman, who inhabited some stony chambers on one side of the ponderous archway. George drove slowly under that splendid Norman gateway, and Isabel looked with a shiver at the portcullis and the great rusty chains high above her head. If it should fall some day upon Mr. Lansdell, as he was riding out of his grand domain! Her mind was like a voluminous picture-book, full of romantic incidents and dreadful catastrophes; and she was always imagining such events as these. Brown Molly jogged slowly along the winding drive,—oh, the beautiful shrubberies, and banks of verdure, and dark shining foliage, and spreading

cedars making solemn shadows yonder on the lawn, and peeps of glistening water in the distance; how beautiful! how beautiful!—and stopped before a Norman porch, a gray old ivy-covered porch, beneath which there was an open doorway that revealed a hall with armour on the walls, and helmed classic heads of white marble on black marble pedestals, and skins of savage beasts upon dark oak floors. Isabel had only caught a brief glimpse of the dusky splendour of this interior, when a groom appeared from behind a distant angle of the house and ran forward to take George Gilbert's horse; and in the next moment Mr. Lansdell came out of the porch, and bade his visitors welcome to Mordred.

"I am so glad to see you! What a lovely morning, is it not? I'm afraid you must have found the roads rather dusty, though. Take care of Mr. Gilbert's horse, Christie; you'd better put him into one of the loose-boxes. You see my dogs know you, Mrs. Gilbert." A liver-coloured pointer and a great black retriever were taking friendly notice of Isabel. "Will you come and

see my pictures at once? I expect Gwendoline and her father, and your friend Mr. Raymond, and the children, presently."

There was no special brilliancy or eloquence in all this, but it sounded different to other people's talk, somehow. The languid, lingering tones were very cordial in spite of their languor; and then how splendid the speaker looked in his loose black-velvet morning coat, which harmonised so exquisitely with the Rembrandt hues of his complexion! There was a waxen-looking hothouse flower in his button-hole, and across that inspiration of a West-end tailor, his waistcoat, there glimmered a slender chain of very yellow gold, with onyx cameos and antique golden coins hanging to it,—altogether different from the big clumsy yellow lockets and fusee-boxes which dangled on the padded chests of the officers at Conventford, whom Isabel had until lately so implicitly believed in.

Mr. Lansdell led the way into a room, beyond which there were other rooms opening one into the other in a long vista of splendour and sunshine. Isabel had only a very faint idea of what she saw

in those beautiful rooms. It was all a confusion of brightness and colour, which was almost too much for her poor sentimental brain. It was all a splendid chaos, in which antique oak cabinets, and buhl and marqueterie, and carved ebony chairs, and filigree-work and ivory, old Chelsea, Battersea, Copenhagen, Vienna, Dresden, Sèvres, Derby, and Salopian china, Majolica and Palissy ware, pictures and painted windows, revolved like the figures in a kaleidoscope before her dazzled eyes. Mr. Lansdell was very kind, and explained the nature of some of these beautiful things as he loitered here and there with his guests. George walked softly, with his hat in his hand, as if he had been in church, and stared with equal reverence at every thing. He was pleased with a Vandevelde because the sea was so nice and green, and the rigging so neatly made out; and he stopped a minute before a Fyt to admire the whiskers of a hare; and he thought that a plump-shouldered divinity by Greuze, with melting blue eyes and a gray-satin gown, was rather a fine young woman; but he did not particularly admire the Murillos or

the Spagnolettis, and thought that the models who sat to those two masters would have done better had they washed their faces and combed their hair before doing so.

Mr. Gilbert was not enthusiastic about the pictures; but Isabel's eyes wandered here and there in a rapture of admiration, and by and by those great dark eyes filled with tears before the gem of Mr. Lansdell's collection, a Raffaelle, a picture of the Man of Sorrows half-fainting under the cruel burden of His cross, sublime in resignation, unspeakably sorrowful and tender; an exquisite half-length figure, sharply defined against a vivid blue sky. "My father believed in that picture," said Mr. Lansdell; "but connoisseurs shrug their shoulders and tell me that it never stood upon the easel of Raffaelle Sanzio d'Urbino."

"But it is so beautiful," Isabel answered, in a low, awe-stricken voice. She had been very inattentive to the Rector's sermon on the previous Sunday, but her heart filled with tender devotion as she looked at this picture. "Does it matter much who painted it, if it is only beautiful?"

And then Mr. Lansdell began to explain in what manner the picture differed from the best-authenticated productions of the prince of painters; but in the middle of his little lecture Mr. Raymond and the orphans came trooping through the rooms, and the conversation became general. Soon after this Lady Gwendoline and her father made their appearance, and then a very neatly-dressed maid conducted the ladies to a dressing-room that had once belonged to Roland's mother, where the window-curtains were sea-green silk, and the looking-glass was framed in white Sèvres, and where there were ivory-backed brushes, and glittering bottles of rich yellow-looking perfume in a casket of gold and enamel.

Isabel took off her bonnet, and smoothed her hair with one of the brushes, and remembered her dressing-table at home, and a broken black brush of George's with all the unprotected wires sticking out at the back. She thought of the drawer in the looking-glass, with a few bent hair-pins, and her husband's razors with coloured bone handles, and a flat empty bottle that had once held lavender-

water, all jostling one another when the drawer was pulled open. Mrs. Gilbert thought of these things while Lady Gwendoline removed her bonnet—another marvellous bonnet—and drew off the tightest coffee-with-plenty-of-milk-in-it-coloured gloves, and revealed long white hands, luminous with opals and diamonds. The Doctor's Wife had time to contemplate Lady Gwendoline's silk dress —that exquisitely-fitting dress, whose soft golden tint was only a little darker than the lady's hair; and the tiny embroidered collar, fitting closely to the long slender throat, and clasped by one big turquoise in a wide rim of lustreless gold, and the turquoise earrings just peeping out under rich bands of auburn hair. Mrs. Gilbert admired all these things, and she saw that Lady Gwendoline's face, which was so handsome in profile, was just a little faded and wan when you had a full view of it.

The orphans took the gold tops off the bottles one by one, and sniffed energetically at the different perfumes, and disputed in whispers as to which was nicest. Lady Gwendoline talked very kindly to

Mrs. Gilbert. She did not at all relish being asked to meet the Doctor's Wife, and she was angry with her cousin for noticing these people; but she was too well bred to be otherwise than kind to Roland's visitor.

They all went down-stairs presently, and were ushered into an oak-paneled room, where there was an oval table laid for luncheon, and where Isabel found herself seated presently on Mr. Lansdell's right hand, and opposite to Lady Gwendoline Pomphrey.

This was life. There was a Lance-like group of hothouse grapes and peaches, crowned with a pine-apple, in a high Dresden basket in the centre of the table. Isabel had never seen a pine-apple out of the celebrated Edith-Dombey picture until to-day. There were flowers upon the table, and a faint odour of orange-blossoms and apricots pervaded the atmosphere. There were starry white glasses, so fragile-looking that it seemed as if a breath would have blown them away; cup-shaped glasses, broad shallow glasses like water-lily leaves, glasses of the palest green, and here and there a

glimpse of ruby glass flashing in the sunshine. Mrs. Gilbert had a very vague idea of the nature of the viands which were served to her at that wonderful feast. Somebody dropped a lump of ice into the shallow glass, and filled it afterwards with a yellow bubbling wine, which had a faint flavour of ripe pears, and which some one said was Moselle. Mr. Lansdell put some white creamy compound on her plate, which might or might not have been chicken; and one of the servants brought her an edifice of airy pastry, filled with some mysterious concoction in which there were little black lumps. She took a spoonful of the concoction, seeing that other people had done so; but she was very doubtful of the little black lumps, which she conjectured to be a mistake of the cook's. And then some one brought her an ice, a real ice,—just as if Mordred Priory had been a perpetual pastrycook's shop,—a pink ice in the shape of a pear, which she ate with a pointed gold spoon; and then the pine-apple was cut, and she had a slice of it, and was rather disappointed in it, as hardly realising the promise of its appearance.

But all the dishes in that banquet were of "such stuff as dreams are made of." So may have tasted the dew-berries which Titania's attendants gave to Bottom. To Isabel there was a dream-like flavour in every thing. Was not *he* by her side, talking to her every now and then? The subjects of which he spoke were commonplace enough, certainly, and he talked to other people as well as to her. He talked about the plans of the Cabinet and the hunting-season to Lord Ruysdale, and he talked of books and pictures with Mr. Raymond and Lady Gwendoline, and of parish matters with George Gilbert. He seemed to know all about every thing in the world, Isabel thought. She could not say much; *how* to admire was all the art she knew. As to the orphans, those young ladies sat side by side, and nudged each other when the sacrificial knife was plunged into any fresh viand, and discoursed together every now and then in rapturous whispers; nothing came amiss to them, from rout-cakes and preserved ginger to lobster-salad or the wall of a fricandeau.

It was four o'clock by the time the pine-apple had been cut, and the banquet concluded. The oak-painted room was lighted by one window—a great square window—which almost filled one side of the room; a splendid window, out of which you could walk into a square garden—an old-fashioned garden—divided from the rest of the grounds by cropped hedges of dense box; wonderful boundaries, that had taken a century or two to grow. The bees were humming in this garden all luncheon-time, and yellow butterflies shot backwards and forwards in the sunshine: tall hollyhocks flowered gorgeously in the prim beds, and threw straight shadows on the smooth grass.

"Shall we go into the garden?" said Lady Gwendoline, as they rose from the table, and every body assented: so presently Isabel found herself amidst a little group upon the miniature lawn, in the centre of which there was a broad marble basin, filled with gold fish, and a feeble little fountain, that made a faint tinkling sound in the still August atmosphere.

Mr. Raymond and Roland Lansdell both hav-

ing plenty to say for themselves, and Lord Ruysdale and Lady Gwendoline being able to discourse pleasantly upon any possible subject, there had been no lack of animated conversation, though neither the doctor nor his wife had done much to keep the ball rolling.

Mr. Lansdell and his guests had been talking of all manner of things; flying off at tangents to all kinds of unlikely subjects; till they had come, somehow or other, to discuss the question of length of days.

"I can't say that I consider long life an inestimable blessing," said Roland, who was amusing himself with throwing minute morsels of a macaroon to the gold fish. "They're not so interesting as Sterne's donkey, are they, Mrs. Gilbert? No, I do *not* consider long life an advantage, unless one can be 'warm and young' for ever, like our dear Raymond. Perhaps I am only depreciating the fruit because it hangs out of my reach, though; for every body knows that the Lansdells never live to be old."

Isabel's heart gave a bump as Roland said this,

and involuntarily she looked at him with just one sudden startled glance. Of course he would die young; Beings always have so died, and always must. A thrill of pain shot through her breast as she thought of this; yet I doubt if she would have had it otherwise. It would be almost better that he should break a blood-vessel, or catch a fever, or commit suicide, than that he should ever live to have gray hair, and wear spectacles and double-soled boots.

Brief as that sudden look of alarm had been, Roland had seen it, and paused for a moment before he went on talking.

"No, we are not a long-lived race. We have been consumptive; and we have had our heads cut off in the good old days, when to make a confidential remark to a friend was very often leze majesty, or high-treason; and we have been killed in battle,—at Flodden, to wit, and at Fontenoy, and in the Peninsular; and one of us was shot through the lungs, in an Irish duel, on the open sward of the 'Phaynix.' In short, I almost fancy some fearful ban must have been set upon us in

the Dark Ages, when one of our progenitors, a wicked prior of Mordred, who had been a soldier and a renegade before he crept into the bosom of the Church, appropriated some of the sanctified plate to make a dowry for his handsome daughter, who married Sir Anthony Lansdell, Knight, and thus became the mother of our race; and we are evidently a doomed race, for very few of us have ever lived to see a fortieth birthday."

"And how is your doom to be brought about, Roland?" asked Lady Gwendoline.

"Oh, *that's* all settled," Mr. Lansdell answered; "I know my destiny."

"It has been predicted to you?"

"Yes."

"How very interesting!" exclaimed the lady, with a pretty silvery laugh. Isabel's eyes opened wider and wider, and fixed themselves on Roland Lansdell's face.

"Pray tell us all about it," continued Lady Gwendoline. "We won't promise to be very much frightened, because the accessories are not quite the thing for a ghost-story. If it were mid-

night now, and we were sitting in the oak room, with the lights burning low, and the shadows trembling on the wall, you might do what you liked with our nerves. And yet I really don't know that a ghost might not be more awful in the broad sunshine — a ghost that would stalk across the grass, and then fade slowly, till it melted into the water-drops of the fountain. Come, Roland, you must tell us all about the prediction; was it made by a pretty girl with a dove on her wrist, like the phantom that appeared to Lord Lyttleton? Shall we have to put back the clock for an hour, in order to foil the designs of your impalpable foe? Or was it a black cat, or a gentleman-usher, or a skeleton; or all three?"

"I daresay it was an abnormal state of the organs of form and colour," said Mr. Raymond. "That's the foundation of all ghost-stories."

"But it isn't by any means a ghost-story," answered Roland Lansdell. "The gentleman who predicted my early death was the very reverse of a phantom; and the region of the prediction

was a place which has never yet been invested with any supernatural horrors. Amongst all the legends of the Old Bailey I never heard of any ghostly record."

"The Old Bailey!" exclaimed Lady Gwendoline.

"Yes. The affair was quite an adventure, and the only adventure I ever had in my life."

"Pray tell us the story."

"But it's rather a long one, and not particularly interesting."

"I insist upon hearing it," said Mr. Raymond; "you've stimulated our organs of wonder, and you're bound to restore our brains to their normal state by satisfying our curiosity."

"Most decidedly," exclaimed Lady Gwendoline, seating herself upon a rustic bench, with the shining folds of her silk dress spread round her like the plumage of some beautiful bird, and a tiny fringed parasol sloping a little backward from her head, and throwing all manner of tremulous pinky shadows upon her animated face.

She was very handsome when she was ani-

mated; it was only when her face was in repose that you saw how much her beauty had faded since the picture with the high forehead and the long curls was first exhibited to an admiring public. It may be that Lady Gwendoline knew this, and was on that account rather inclined to be animated about trifles.

"Well, I'll tell you the story, if you like," said Roland; "but I warn you that there's not much in it. I don't suppose you—any of you—take much interest in criminal cases; but this one made rather a sensation at the time."

"A criminal case?"

"Yes. I was in town on business a year or two ago. I'd come over from Switzerland to renew some leases, and look into a whole batch of tiresome business matters, which my lawyer insisted upon my attending to in my own proper person, very much to my annoyance. While I was in London I dropped into the United Joint-Stock Bank, Temple-Bar Branch, to get circular notes and letters of credit upon their correspondent at Constantinople, and so on. I was not in the

office more than five minutes. But while I was talking to one of the clerks at the counter, a man came in, and stood close at my elbow while he handed in a cheque for eighty-seven pounds ten, or some such amount—I know it came very close upon the hundred—received the money, and went out. He looked like a groom out of livery. I left the bank almost immediately after him, and as he turned into a little alley leading down to the Temple, I followed a few paces behind him, for I had business in Paper Buildings. At the bottom of the alley my friend the groom was met by a big black-whiskered man, who seemed to have been waiting for him, for he caught him suddenly by the arm, and said, 'Well, did they do it?' 'Yes,' the other man answered, and began fumbling in his waistcoat-pocket, making a chinking sound as he did so. I had seen him put his money, which he took in notes and gold, into this waistcoat-pocket. 'You needn't have pounced upon me so precious sharp,' he said rather sulkily; 'I wasn't going to bolt with it, was I?' The black-whiskered man had seen me by this time, and he

muttered something to his companion, which evidently meant that he was to hold his tongue, and then dragged him 'off' without further ceremony in the opposite direction to that in which I was going. This was all I saw of the groom or the black-whiskered gentleman on that occasion. I thought their method of cashing a cheque was rather a queer one; but I thought no more about it, until three weeks afterwards, when I went into the Temple-Bar Office of the United Joint-Stock again to complete my Continental arrangements, and was told that the cheque for eighty-seven pounds ten, more or less, which had been cashed in my presence, was a forgery; one of a series of most audacious frauds, perpetrated by a gang whose plans had only just come to light, and none of whom had yet been arrested. 'They've managed to keep themselves dark in the most extraordinary manner,' the clerk told me; 'the cheques are supposed to have been all fabricated by one man, but three or four men have been employed to get hold of the original signatures of our customers, which they have obtained by a complicated

system. No two cheques have been presented by the same person,—that's the point that has beaten the detectives; they don't know what sort of men to look for.' 'Don't they?' said I; 'then I think I can assist them in the matter.' Whereupon I told my little story of the black-whiskered gentleman."

Mr. Lansdell paused to take breath, and stole a glance at Isabel. She was pale always,—but she was very pale now, and was watching him with an eager breathless expression.

"Silly romantic little thing," he thought, "to be so intensely absorbed in my story."

"You're getting interesting, Roland," said Lady Gwendoline. "Pray, go on."

"The upshot of the matter was, that at eight o'clock that evening a grave little gentleman in a pepper-and-salt waistcoat came to me at Mivart's, and cross-questioned me closely as to what I knew of the man who had cashed the cheque. 'You think you could recognise this man with the black whiskers?' he said. 'Yes; most decidedly I could.' 'And you'll swear to him, if necessary?'

'With pleasure.' On this the detective departed, and came to me the next day, to tell me that he fancied he was on the track of the man he wanted, but he was at a loss for means of identification. He knew, or thought that he knew, who the man was; but he didn't know the man himself from Adam. The gang had taken fright, and it was believed that they had all started for Liverpool, with the intention of getting off to America by a vessel that was expected to sail at eight o'clock the following morning. The detective had only just got his information, and he came to me for help. The result of the business was, that I put on my greatcoat, sent for a cab, and started for Euston Square with my friend the detective, with a view to identifying the black-whiskered gentleman. It was the first adventure I had ever had in my life, and I assure you I most heartily enjoyed it.

"Well, we travelled by the mail, got into Liverpool in the dead of the night, and in the bleak early dawn of the next morning I had the supreme pleasure of pointing out my black-whis-

kered acquaintance, just as he was going to step on board the steamer that was to convey him to the *Atalanta* screw-steamship, bound for New York. He looked very black at first; but when he found that my companion was altogether *en règle*, he went away with him, meekly enough, declaring that it was all a mistake, and that it would be easily set right in town. I let the two go back together, and returned by a later train, very well pleased with my adventure.

"I was not so well pleased, however, when I found that I was wanted as a witness at preliminary examinations, and adjourned examinations, and on and off through a trial that lasted four days and a half; to say nothing of being badgered and browbeaten by Old-Bailey practitioners, —who were counsel for the prisoner,—and who asked me if it was my friend's whiskers I recognised, or if I had never seen any other whiskers exactly like his? if I should know him without his whiskers? whether I could swear to the colour of his waistcoat? whether any member of my family had ever been in a lunatic asylum? whether I usu-

ally devoted my leisure-time to travelling about with detective officers? whether I had been plucked at Oxford? whether I should be able to recognise an acquaintance whom I had only seen once in twenty years? whether I was short-sighted? could I swear I was not short-sighted? would I be kind enough to read a verse or so from a diamond edition of the works of Thomas Moore? and so on. But question me as they would, the prisoner at the bar,—commonly known as Jack the Scribe, *alias* Jack the Gentleman, *alias* ever so many other names, which I have completely forgotten, —was the identical person whom I had seen meet the groom at the entrance to the Temple. My evidence was only a single link in a long chain; but I suppose it was eminently damaging to my black-whiskered friend; for, when he and two of his associates had received their sentence —ten years' penal servitude—he turned towards where I was standing, and said:

"'I don't bear any grudge against the gentlemen of the jury, and I don't bear any malice against the judge, though his sentence isn't a light

one; but when a languid swell mixes himself up in business that doesn't concern him, he deserves to get it hot and strong. If ever I come out of prison alive, I'll *kill you!*'

"He shook his fist at me as he said it. There wasn't much in the words, but there was a good deal in the way in which they were spoken. He tried to say more; but the warders got hold of him and held him down, panting and gasping, and with his face all of a dull livid white. I saw no more of him; but if he *does* live to come out of prison, I most firmly believe he'll keep his word."

"Izzie," cried George Gilbert suddenly, "what's the matter?"

All the point of Mr. Lansdell's story was lost; for at this moment Isabel tottered and fell slowly backward upon the sward, and all the gold fish leaped away in a panic of terror as the doctor dipped his hat into the marble basin. He splashed the water into his wife's face, and she opened her eyes at last, very slowly, and looked round her.

"Did he say that—" she said,—"did he say that he'd kill ——?"

CHAPTER V.

THE FIRST WARNING.

Mrs. Gilbert recovered very quickly from her fainting-fit. She had been frightened by Mr. Lansdell's story, she said, and the heat had made her dizzy. She sat very quietly upon a sofa in the drawing-room, with one of the orphans on each side of her, while Brown Molly was being harnessed.

Lady Gwendoline went away with her father, after bidding Mrs. Gilbert rather a cool good-morning. The Earl of Ruysdale's daughter did not approve of the fainting-fit, which she was pleased to call Mrs. Gilbert's extraordinary demonstration.

"If she were a single woman, I should fancy she was trying to fascinate Roland," Lady Gwendoline said to her father as they drove homewards.

"What can possibly have induced him to invite those people to Mordred? The man is a clod, and the woman a nonentity; except when she chooses to make an exhibition of herself by fainting away. That sort of person is always fainting away, and being knocked down by feathers, and going unexpectedly into impossible hysterics; and so on."

But if Lady Gwendoline was unkind to the Doctor's Wife, Roland was kind; dangerously, bewilderingly kind. He was *so* anxious about Isabel's health. It was his fault, entirely his fault that she had fainted. He had kept her standing under the blazing sun while he told his stupid story. He should never forgive himself, he said. And he would scarcely accept George Gilbert's assurance that his wife was all right. He rang the bell, and ordered strong tea for his visitors. With his own hands he closed the Venetian shutters, and reduced the light to a cool dusky glimmer. He begged Mr. Gilbert to allow him to order a close carriage for his wife's return to Graybridge.

"The gig shall be sent home to you to-night," he said; "I am sure the air and dust will be too much for Mrs. Gilbert."

But Mr. Raymond hereupon interfered, and said the fresh air was just the very thing that Isabel wanted, to which opinion the lady herself subscribed. She did not want to cause trouble, she said: she would not for all the world have caused *him* trouble, she thought: so the gig was brought round presently, and George drove his wife away, under the Norman archway by which they had entered in the fresh noonday sun. The young man was in excellent spirits, and declared that he had enjoyed himself beyond measure—these undemonstrative people always declare that they enjoy themselves—but Isabel was very silent and subdued; and when questioned upon the subject, said that she was tired.

Oh, how blank the world seemed after that visit to Mordred Priory! It was all over. This one supreme draught of bliss had been drained to the very dregs. It would be November soon, and

Roland Lansdell would go away. He would go before November, perhaps: he would go suddenly, whenever the fancy seized him. Who can calculate the arrangements of the Giaour or Sir Reginald Glanville? At any moment, in the dead darkness of the moonless night, the hero may call for his fiery steed, and only the thunder of hurrying hoofs upon the hard high-road may bear witness of his departure.

Mr. Lansdell might leave Mordred at any hour in the long summer day, Isabel thought, as she stood at the parlour-window looking out at the dusty lane, where Mrs. Jeffson's fowls were pecking up stray grains of wheat that had been scattered by some passing wain. He might be gone now—yes, now, while she stood there thinking of him. Her heart seemed to stop beating as she remembered this. Why had he ever invited her to Mordred? Was it not almost cruel to open the door of that paradise just a little way, only to shut it again when she was half blinded by the glorious light from within? Would he ever think of her, this grand creature with the

dark pensive eyes, the tender dreamy eyes that were never the same colour for two consecutive minutes? Was she any thing to him, or was that musical lowering of his voice common to him when he spoke to women? Again and again, and again and again, she went over all the shining ground of that day at Mordred; and the flowers, and glass, and pictures, and painted windows, and hot-house fruit, only made a kind of variegated background, against which *he* stood forth paramount and unapproachable.

She sat and thought of Roland Lansdell, with some scrap of never-to-be-finished work lying in her lap. It was better than reading. A crabbed little old woman who kept the only circulating-library in Graybridge noted a falling-off in her best customer about this time. It was better than reading, to sit through all the length of a hot August afternoon thinking of Roland Lansdell. What romance had ever been written that was equal to this story; this perpetual fiction, with a real hero dominant in every chapter? There was a good deal of repetition in the book, per-

haps; but Isabel was never aware of its monotony.

It was all very wicked of course, and a deep and cruel wrong to the simple country surgeon, who ate his dinner, and complained of the underdone condition of the mutton, upon one side of the table, while Isabel read the inexhaustible volume on the other. It was very wicked; but Mrs. Gilbert had not yet come to consider the wickedness of her ways. She was a very good wife, very gentle and obedient; and she fancied she had a right to furnish the secret chambers of her mind according to her own pleasure. What did it matter if a strange god reigned in the temple, so long as the doors were for ever closed upon his awful beauty; so long as she rendered all due service to her liege lord and master? He *was* her lord and master, though his fingers were square at the tips, and he had an abnormal capacity for the consumption of spring-onions. Spring-onions! all-the-year-round onions, Isabel thought; for those obnoxious bulbs seemed always in season at Graybridge. She was very

wicked; and she thought perpetually of Roland Lansdell, as she had thought of Eugene Aram, and Lara, and Ernest Maltravers—blue-eyed Ernest Maltravers. The blue-eyed heroes were out of fashion now, for was not *he* dark of aspect?

She was very wicked, she was very foolish, very childish. All her life long she had played with her heroines and heroes as other children play with their dolls. Now Edith Dombey was the favourite, and now dark-eyed Zuleika, kneeling for ever at Selim's feet with an unheeded flower in her hand. Left quite to herself through all her idle girlhood, this foolish child had fed upon three-volume novels and sentimental poetry: and now that she was married and invested with the solemn duties of a wife, she could not throw off the sweet romantic bondage all at once, and take to pies and puddings.

So she made no endeavour to banish Mr. Lansdell's image from her mind. If she had recognised the need of such an effort, she would have made it perhaps. But she thought that *he* would go away, and her life would drop back to

its dead level, and would be "all the same as if he had not been."

But Mr. Lansdell did not leave Mordred just yet. Only a week after the never-to-be-forgotten day at the Priory, he came again to Thurston's Crag, and found Isabel sitting under the oak with her books in her lap. She started up as he approached her, looking rather frightened, and with her face flushed and her eyelids drooping. She had not expected him. Demi-gods do not often drop out of the clouds. It is only once in a way that Castor and Pollux are seen fighting in a mortal fray. Mrs. Gilbert sat down again, blushing and trembling; but, oh, so happy, so foolishly, unutterably happy; and Roland Lansdell seated himself by her side and began to talk to her.

He did not make the slightest allusion to that unfortunate swoon which had spoiled the climax of his story. That one subject, which of all others would have been most embarrassing to the Doctor's Wife, was scrupulously avoided by Mr. Lansdell. He talked of all manner of things. He had been a *flâneur* pure and simple for the last ten years,

and was a consummate master of the art of conversation; so he talked to this ignorant girl of books, and pictures, and foreign cities, and wonderful people, living and dead, of whom she had never heard before. He seemed to know every thing, Mrs. Gilbert thought. She felt as if she was before the wonderful gates of a new fairy-land, and Mr. Lansdell had the keys, and could open them for her at his will, and could lead her through the dim mysterious pathways into the beautiful region beyond.

Mr. Lansdell asked his companion a good many questions about her life at Graybridge, and the books she read. He found that her life was a very idle one, and that she was perpetually reading the same books,—the dear dilapidated volumes of popular novels that were to be had at every circulating-library. Poor little childish creature, who could wonder at her foolish sentimentality? Out of pure philanthropy Roland offered to lend her any of the books in his library.

"If you can manage to stroll this way to-morrow morning, I'll bring you the Life of Robes-

pierre, and Carlyle's *French Revolution.* I don't suppose you'll like Carlyle at first; but he's wonderful when you get accustomed to his style—like a monster brass-band, you know, that stuns you at first with its crashing thunder, until, little by little, you discover the wonderful harmony, and appreciate the beauty of the instrumentation. Shall I bring you Lamartine's *Girondists* as well? That will make a great pile of books, but you need not read them laboriously; you can pick out the pages you like here and there, and we can talk about them afterwards."

The French Revolution was one of Isabel's pet oases in the history of the universe. A wonderful period, in which a quiet country-bred young woman had only to make her way up to Paris and assassinate a tyrant, and, lo, she became "a feature" throughout all time. Mr. Lansdell had discovered this special fancy in his talk with the Doctor's Wife, and he was pleased to let in the light of positive knowledge on her vague ideas of the chiefs of the Mountain and the martyrs of the Gironde. Was it not an act of pure philanthropy

to clear some of the sentimental mistiness out of that pretty little head? Was it not a good work rather than a harmful one to come now and then to this shadowy resting-place under the oak, and while away an hour or so with this poor little half-educated damsel, who had so much need of some sounder instruction than she had been able to glean, unaided, out of novels and volumes of poetry?

There was no harm in these morning rambles, these meetings, which arose out of the purest chance. There was no harm whatever: especially as Mr. Lansdell meant to turn his back upon Midlandshire directly the partridge-shooting was over.

He told Isabel, indirectly, of this intended departure, presently.

"Yes," he said, "you must ask me for whatever books you would like to read: and by and by, when I have left Mordred—"

He paused for a moment involuntarily, for he saw that Isabel gave a little shiver.

"When I leave Mordred, at the end of Octo-

ber, you must go to the Priory, and choose the books for yourself. My housekeeper is a very good woman, and she will be pleased to wait upon you."

So Mrs. Gilbert began quite a new course of reading, and eagerly devoured the books which Mr. Lansdell brought her; and wrote long extracts from them, and made profile sketches of the heroes, all looking from right to left, and all bearing a strong family resemblance to the master of Mordred Priory. The education of the Doctor's Wife took a grand stride by this means. She sat for hours together reading in the little parlour at Graybridge; and George, whose life was a very busy one, grew to consider her only in her normal state with a book in her hand, and was in no wise offended when she ate her supper with an open volume by the side of her plate, or responded vaguely to his simple talk. Mr. Gilbert was quite satisfied. He had never sought for more than this: a pretty little wife to smile upon him when he came home, to brush his hat for him now and then in the passage

after breakfast, before he went out for his day's work, and to walk to church twice every Sunday hanging upon his arm. If any one had ever said that such a marriage as this in any way fell short of perfect and entire union, Mr. Gilbert would have smiled upon that person as on a harmless madman.

Mr. Lansdell met the Doctor's Wife very often: sometimes on the bridge beside the water-mill; sometimes in the meadow-land which surged in emerald billows all about Graybridge and Mordred and Warncliffe. He met her very often. It was no new thing for Isabel to ramble here and there in that lovely rustic paradise: but it was quite a new thing for Mr. Lansdell to take such a fancy for pedestrian exercise. The freak could not last long, though: the feast of St. Partridge the martyr was close at hand, and then Mr. Lansdell would have something better to do than to dawdle away his time in country lanes and meadows, talking to the Doctor's Wife.

Upon the very eve of that welcome morning which was to set all the breech-loading rifles

in Midlandshire popping at those innocent red-breasted victims, George Gilbert received a letter from his old friend and comrade Mr. Sigismund Smith, who wrote in very high spirits, and with a great many blots.

"I'm coming down to stop a few days with you, dear old boy," he wrote, "to get the London smoke blown out of my hyacinthines, and to go abroad in the meadows to see the young lambs;—are there any young lambs in September, by the by? I want to see what sort of a matron you have made of Miss Isabel Sleaford. Do you remember that day in the garden when you first saw her? A palpable case of spoons there and then! K-k-c-k-k! as Mr. Buckstone remarks when he digs his knuckles into the walking-gentleman's ribs. Does she make puddings, and sew on buttons, and fill up the holes in your stockings with wonderful trelliswork? She never would do that sort of thing at Camberwell. I shall give you a week, and I shall spend another week in the bosom of my family; and I shall bring a gun, because it looks well in the railway

carriage, you know, especially if it doesn't go off, which I suppose it won't, if it isn't loaded; though, to my mind, there's always something suspicious about the look of firearms, and I should never be surprised to see them explode by spontaneous combustion, or something of that kind. I suppose you've heard of my new three-volume novel—a legitimate three-volume romance, with all the interest concentrated upon one body,—*The Mystery of Mowbray Manor*,—pleasant alliteration of M's, eh?—which is taking the town by storm; that's to say, Camden Town, where I partial-board, and have some opportunity of pushing the book myself by going into all the circulating-libraries I pass, and putting my name down for an early perusal of the first copy. Of course I never go for the book; but if I am the means of making any one simple-minded librarian take a copy of *The M. of M. M.* more than he wants, I feel I have not laboured in vain."

Mr. Smith arrived at Warncliffe by an early train next morning, and came on to Graybridge in an omnibus, which was all spiky with guns.

He was in very high spirits, and talked incessantly to Isabel, who had stayed at home to receive him; who had stayed at home when there was just a faint chance that Mr. Lansdell might take his morning walk in the direction of Lord Thurston's Crag,—only a faint chance, for was it not the 1st of September; and might not he prefer the slaughter of partridges to those lazy loiterings under the big oak?

Mrs. Gilbert gave her old friend a very cordial welcome. She was fond of him, as she might have been of some big brother less objectionable than the ordinary run of big brothers. He had never seen Mr. Sleaford's daughter looking so bright and beautiful. A new element had been introduced into her life. She was happy, unutterably happy, on the mystical threshold of a new existence. She didn't want to be Edith Dombey any longer. Not for all the ruby-velvet gowns and diamond-coronets in the world would she have sacrificed one accidental half-hour on the bridge under Lord Thurston's oak.

She sat at the little table smiling and talking

gaily, while the author of *The Mystery of Mowbray Manor* ate about half a quartern of dough made up into puffy Yorkshire cakes, and new-laid eggs and frizzled bacon in proportion. Mr. Smith deprecated the rampant state of his appetite by and by, and made a kind of apology for his ravages.

"You see, the worst of going into society is *that*," he remarked vaguely, "they see one eat; and it's apt to tell against one in three volumes. It's a great pity that fiction is not compatible with a healthy appetite; but it isn't; and society is so apt to object to one, if one doesn't come up to its expectations. You've no idea what a lot of people have invited me out to tea—ladies, you know—since the publication of *The Mystery of Mowbray Manor*. I used to go at first. But they generally said to me, 'Lor, Mr. Smith, you're not a bit like what I fancied you were! I thought you'd be TALL, and DARK, and HAUGHTY-LOOKING, like Montague Manderville in *The Mystery of*—' &c. &c.; and that sort of thing is apt to make a man feel himself an impostor. And if a writer of fiction can't drink hot tea without colouring up,

as if he had just pocketed a silver spoon, and it was his guilty conscience, why, my idea is, he'd better stay at home. I don't think any man was ever as good or as bad as his books," continued Sigismund, reflectively, scraping up a spoonful of that liquid-grease which Mrs. Jeffson tersely entitled "dip." "There's a kind of righteous indignation, and a frantic desire to do something splendid for his fellow-creatures, like vaccinating them all over again, or founding a hospital for every body, which a man feels when he's writing—especially late at night, when he's been keeping himself awake with bitter-ale—that seems to ooze away somehow when his copy has gone to the printers. And it's pretty much the same with one's scorn and hate and cynicism. Nobody ever quite comes up to his books. Even Byron, but for turning-down his collars, and walking lame, and dining on biscuits and soda-water, might have been a social failure. I think there's a good deal of Horace Walpole's Inspired Idiocy in this world. The morning sun shines, and the statue is musical; but all the day there

is silence; and at night—in society, I suppose—the sounds are lugubrious. How I do talk, Izzie, and *you* don't say any thing! But I needn't ask if you're happy. I never saw you looking so pretty."

Isabel blushed. Was she pretty? Oh, she wanted so much to be pretty!

"And I think George may congratulate himself upon having secured the dearest little wife in all Midlandshire."

Mrs. Gilbert blushed a deeper red; but the happy smile died away on her lips. Something, a very vague something as yet, was lurking in what Mr. Raymond would have called her "inner consciousness;" and she thought perhaps George had not such very great reason for self-gratulation.

"I always do as he tells me," she said naïvely; "and he's kinder than mamma used to be, and doesn't mind my reading at meals. You know how ma used to go on about it. And I mend his socks—sometimes." She drew open a drawer, where there were some little bundles of gray

woollen stuff, and balls of worsted with big needles stuck across them. "And, oh, Sigismund," she exclaimed rather inconsecutively, "we've been to Mordred—to Mordred Priory—to a luncheon; quite a grand luncheon—pine-apple and ices, and nearly half-a-dozen different kinds of glasses for each person."

She could talk to Sigismund about Mordred and the master of Mordred. He was not like George, and he would sympathise with her enthusiasm about that earthly paradise.

"Do you know Mordred?" she asked. She felt a kind of pleasure in calling the mansion "Mordred," all short, as *he* called it.

"I know the village of Mordred well enough," Mr. Smith answered, "and I *ought* to know the Priory precious well. The last Mr. Lansdell gave my father a good deal of business; and when Roland Lansdell was being coached-up in the Classics by a private tutor, I used to go up to the Priory and read with him. The governor was very glad to get such a chance for me; but I can't say I intensely appreciated the advantage

myself, on hot summer afternoons, when there was cricketing on Warncliffe meads."

"You knew him—you knew Mr. Roland Lansdell when he was a boy?" said Isabel, with a little gasp.

"I certainly did, my dear Izzie; but I don't think there's any thing wonderful in that. You couldn't open your eyes much wider if I said I'd known Eugene Aram when he was a boy. I remember Roland Lansdell," continued Mr. Smith, slapping his breakfast-napkin across his dusty boots, and a very jolly young fellow he was; a regular young swell, with a chimney-pot hat and dandy boots, and a gold hunter in his waistcoat-pocket, and no end of pencil-cases, and cricket-bats, and drawing-portfolios, and single-sticks, and fishing-tackle. He taught me fencing," added Sigismund, throwing himself suddenly into a position that covered one entire side of the little parlour, and making a postman's knock upon the carpet with the sole of his foot.

"Come, Mrs. Gilbert," he said, presently, "put on your bonnet and come out for a walk.

I suppose there's no chance of our seeing George till dinner-time."

Isabel was pleased to go out. All the world seemed astir upon this bright September morning; and out of doors there was always just a chance of meeting *him*. She fetched her hat, the broad-leaved straw that cast such soft shadows upon her face, and she took up the big green parasol, and was ready to accompany her old friend in a minute.

"I don't want the greetings in the market-place," Mr. Smith said, as they went out into the lane, where it was always very dusty in dry weather, and very muddy when there was rain. "I know almost every body in Graybridge; and there'll be a round of stereotyped questions and answers to go through as to how I'm getting on 'oop in London.' I can't tell those people that I earn my bread by writing *The Demon of the Galleys*, or *The Mystery of Mowbray Manor*. Take me for a country walk, Izzie; a regular rustic ramble."

Mrs. Gilbert blushed. That habit of blushing

when she spoke or was spoken to had grown upon her lately. Then, after a little pause, she said shyly:

"Thurston's Crag is a pretty place; shall we go there?"

"Suppose we do. That's quite a brilliant thought of yours, Izzie. Thurston's Crag *is* a pretty place, a nice drowsy, lazy old place, where one always goes to sleep, and wishes one had bottled beer. It reminds one of bottled beer, you know, the waterfall,—bottled beer in a rampant state of effervescence."

Isabel's face was all lighted up with smiles.

"I am so glad you have come to see us, Sigismund," she said.

She was very glad. She might go to Thurston's Crag now as often as she could beguile Sigismund thitherward, and that haunting sense of something wrong would no longer perplex her in the midst of her unutterable joy. It was unutterable! She had tried to write poetry about it, and had failed dismally, though her heart was making poetry all day long, as wildly, vaguely

beautiful as Solomon's Song. She had tried to set her joy to music; but there were no notes on the harpsichord that could express such wondrous melody; though there was indeed one little simple theme, an old-fashioned air, arranged as a waltz, "'Twere vain to tell thee all I feel," which Isabel would play slowly, again and again, for an hour together, dragging the melody out in lingering legato notes, and listening to its talk about Roland Lansdell.

But all this was very wicked, of course. To-day she could go to Thurston's Crag with a serene front, an unburdened conscience. What could be more intensely proper than this country walk with her mother's late partial-boarder?

They turned into the meadows presently, and as they drew nearer and nearer to the grassy hollow under the cliff, where the miller's cottage and the waterfall were nestled together like jewels in a casket of emerald velvet, the ground seemed to grow unsubstantial under her feet, as if Thurston's Crag had been a phantasmal region suspended in mid air. Would he be there? Her

heart was perpetually beating out the four syllables of that simple sentence: Would he be there? It was the 1st of September, and he would be away shooting partridges, perhaps. Oh, was there even the remotest chance that he would be there?

Sigismund handed her across the stile in the last meadow, and then there was only a little bit of smooth verdure between them and the waterfall; but the overhanging branches of the trees intervened, and Isabel could not see yet whether there was any one on the bridge.

But presently the narrow winding path brought them to a break in the foliage. Isabel's heart gave a tremendous bound, and then the colour, which had come and gone so often on her face, faded away altogether. He was there: leaning with his back against the big knotted trunk of the oak, and making a picture of himself, with one arm above his head, plucking the oak-leaves and dropping them into the water. He looked down at the glancing water and the hurrying leaves with a moody dissatisfied scowl. Had he been

any thing less than a hero, one might have thought that he looked sulky.

But when the light footsteps came rustling through the long grass, accompanied by the faint fluttering of a woman's garments, his face brightened as suddenly, as if the dense foliage above his head had been swept away by a Titan's axe, and all the sunshine let in upon him. That very expressive face darkened a little when Mr. Lansdell saw Sigismund behind the Doctor's Wife; but the cloud was transient. The jealous delusions of a monomaniac could scarcely have transformed Mr. Smith into a Cassio. Desdemona might have pleaded for him all day long, and might have supplied him with any number of pocket-handkerchiefs hemmed and marked by her own fair hands, without causing the Moor a single apprehensive pang.

Mr. Lansdell did not recognise the youthful acquaintance, who had stumbled a little way in the thorny path of knowledge by his side; but he saw that Sigismund was a harmless creature; and after he had bared his handsome head before

Isabel, he gave Mr. Smith a friendly little nod of general application.

"I have let the keepers shoot the first of the partridges," he said, dropping his voice almost to a whisper as he bent over Mrs. Gilbert, "and I have been here ever since ten o'clock."

It was past one now. He had been there three hours, Isabel thought, waiting for her.

Yes, it had gone so far as this already. But he was to go away at the end of October. He was to go away, it would all be over, and the world come to an end by the 1st of November.

There was a little pile of books upon the seat under the tree. Mr. Lansdell pushed them off the bench, and tumbled them ignominiously among the long grass and weeds beneath it. Isabel saw them fall, and uttered a little exclamation of surprise.

"You have brought me—" she began; but to her astonishment Roland checked her with a frown, and began to talk about the waterfall, and the trout that were to be caught in the season lower down in the stream. Mr. Lansdell was

more worldly wise than the Doctor's Wife, and he knew that the books brought there for her might seem slightly suggestive of an appointment. There had been no appointment, of course; but there was always a chance of finding Isabel under Lord Thurston's oak. Had she not gone there constantly, long ago, when Mr. Lansdell was lounging in Grecian Islands, and eating ices under the colonnades of Venice? and was it strange that she should go there now?

I should become very wearisome, were I to transcribe all that was said that morning. It was a very happy morning,—a long, idle sunshiny pause in the business of life. Roland recognised an old acquaintance in Sigismund Smith presently, and the two young men talked gaily of those juvenile days at Mordred. They talked pleasantly of all manner of things. Mr. Lansdell must have been quite ardently attached to Sigismund in those early days, if one might judge of the past by the present; for he greeted his old acquaintance with absolute effusion, and sketched out quite a little royal progress of rustic

enjoyment for the week Sigismund was to stay at Graybridge.

"We'll have a picnic," he said: "you remember we talked about a picnic, Mrs. Gilbert. We'll have a picnic at Waverly Castle; there isn't a more delightfully inconvenient place for a picnic in all Midlandshire. One can dine on the top of the western tower, in actual danger of one's life. You can write to your uncle Raymond, Smith, and ask him to join us, with the two nieces, who are really most amiable children; so estimably unintellectual, and no more in the way than a little extra furniture: you mayn't want it; but if you've space enough for it in your rooms, it doesn't in the least inconvenience you. This is Thursday; shall we say Saturday for my picnic? I mean it to be my picnic, you know; a bachelor's picnic, with all the most obviously necessary items forgotten, I daresay. I think the salad-dressing and the champagne-nippers are the legitimate things to forget, are they not? Do you think Saturday will suit you and the Doctor, Mrs. Gilbert? I should like it to be Saturday, because

you must all dine with me at Mordred on Sunday, in order that we may drink success and a dozen editions to the—what's the name of your novel, Smith? Shall it be Saturday, Mrs. Gilbert?"

Isabel only answered by deepening blushes and a confused murmur of undistinguishable syllables. But her face lighted up with a look of rapture that was wont to illumine it now and then, and which Mr. Lansdell thought was the most beautiful expression of the human countenance that he had ever seen, out of a picture or in one. Sigismund answered for the Doctor's Wife. Yes, he was sure Saturday would do capitally. He would settle it all with George, and he would answer for his uncle Raymond and the orphans; and he would answer for the weather even, for the matter of that. He further accepted the invitation to dine at Mordred on Sunday, for himself and his host and hostess.

"You know you can, Izzie," he said, in answer to Mrs. Gilbert's deprecating murmur; "it's mere nonsense talking about prior engagements in a place like Graybridge, where nobody ever does go

out to dinner, and a tea-party on a Sunday is looked upon as wickedness. Lansdell always was a jolly good fellow, and I'm not a bit surprised to find that he's a jolly good fellow still; because if you train up a twig in the way it's inclined, the tree will not depart from it, as the philosopher has observed. I want to see Mordred again, most particularly; for, to tell you the truth, Lansdell," said Mr. Smith, with a gush of candour, "I was thinking of taking the Priory for the scene of my next novel. There's a mossy kind of gloom about the eastern side of the house and the old square garden, that I think would take with the general public; and with regard to the cellarage," cried Sigismund, kindling with sudden enthusiasm, "I've been through it with a lantern, and I'm sure there's accommodation for a perfect regiment of bodies; which would be a consideration if I was going to do the story in penny numbers; for in penny numbers one body always leads on to another, and you never know, when you begin, how far you may be obliged to go. However, my present idea is three volumes. What do you

think now, Lansdell, of the eastern side of the Priory; deepening the gloom, you know, and letting the gardens all run to seed, with rank grass and a blasted cedar or so, and introducing rats behind the panelling, and a general rottenness, and perhaps a ghostly footstep in the corridor, or a periodical rustling behind the tapestry? What do you say, now, to Mordred, taken in connexion with twin brothers hating each other from infancy, and both in love with the same woman, and one of them—the darkest twin, with a scar on his forehead—walling up the young female in a deserted room, while the more amiable twin without a scar devotes his life to searching for her in foreign climes, accompanied by a detective officer and a bloodhound? It's only a rough idea at present," concluded Mr. Smith modestly; "but I shall work it out in railway trains and pedestrian exercise. There's nothing like railway travelling or pedestrian exercise for working out an idea of that kind."

Mr. Lansdell declared that his house and grounds were entirely at the service of his young

friend; and it was settled that the picnic should take place on Saturday, and the dinner-party on Sunday; and George Gilbert's acquiescence in the two arrangements was guaranteed by his friend Sigismund. And then the conversation wandered away into more fanciful regions; and Roland and Mr. Smith talked of men and books, while Isabel listened, only chiming in now and then with little sentimental remarks, to which the master of Mordred Priory listened as intently as if the speaker had been a Madame de Staël. She may not have said any thing very wonderful; but those were wonderful blushes that came and went upon her pale face as she spoke, fluttering and fitful as the shadow of a butterfly's wing hovering above a white rose; and the golden light in her eyes was more wonderful than any thing out of a fairy tale.

But he always listened to her, and he always looked at her from a certain position which he had elected for himself in relation to her. She was a beautiful child; and he, a man of the world, very much tired and worn out by the ordinary

men and women of the world, was half-amused, half-interested, by her simplicity and sentimentality. He did no wrong, therefore, by cultivating her acquaintance when accident threw her, as had happened so often lately, in his way. There was no harm, so long as he held firmly to the position he had chosen for himself; so long as he contemplated this young gushing creature from across all the width of his own wasted youth and useless days; so long as he looked at her as a bright unapproachable being, as much divided from him by the differences in their natures, as by the fact that she was the lawful wife of Mr. George Gilbert of Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne.

Mr. Lansdell tried his uttermost to hold firmly to this self-elected position with regard to Isabel. He was always alluding to his own age; an age not to be computed, as he explained to Mrs. Gilbert, by the actual number of years in which he had inhabited this lower world, but to be calculated rather by the waste of those wearisome years, and the general decadence that had fallen upon him thereby.

"I suppose, according to the calendar, I am only your senior by a decade," he said to Izzie one day; "but when I hear you talk about your books and your heroes, I feel as if I had lived a century."

He took the trouble to make little speeches of this kind very often, for Mrs. Gilbert's edification; and there were times when the Doctor's Wife was puzzled, and even wounded, by his talk and his manner, which were both subject to abrupt transitions, that were perplexing to a simple person. Mr. Lansdell was capricious and fitful in his moods, and would break off in the middle of some delicious little bit of sentiment, worthy of Ernest Maltravers or Eugene Aram himself, with a sneering remark about the absurdity of the style of conversation into which he had been betrayed; and would sit moodily pulling his favourite retriever's long ears for ten minutes or so, and then get up and wish Isabel an abrupt good-morning. Mrs. Gilbert took these changes of manner very deeply to heart. It was her fault, no doubt; she had said something silly; or affected, perhaps.

Had not her brother Horace been apt to jeer at her as a mass of affectation, because she preferred Byron to *Bell's Life*, and was more interested in Edith Dombey than in the favourite for the Oaks? She had said something that had sounded affected, though uttered in all simplicity of heart; and Mr. Lansdell had been disgusted by her talk. Contempt from *him*—she always thought of him in italics—was very bitter! She would never, never go to Thurston's Crag again. But then, after one of these abruptly-unpleasant "good-mornings," Mr. Lansdell was very apt to call at Graybridge. He wanted Mr. Gilbert to go and see one of the men on the home-farm, who seemed in a very bad way, poor fellow, and ought not to be allowed to go on any longer without medical advice. Mr. Lansdell was very fond of looking-up cases for the Graybridge surgeon. How good he was! Isabel thought; he in whom goodness was in a manner a supererogatory attribute; since heroes who were dark, and pensive, and handsome were not called upon to be otherwise virtuous. How good he was! he who was as scornfully depre-

ciative of his own merits as if the bones of another Mr. Clarke had been bleaching in some distant cave in imperishable evidence of his guilt. How good he was! and he had not been offended or disgusted with her when he left her so suddenly; for to-day he was kinder to her than ever, and lingered for nearly an hour in the unshaded parlour, in the hope that the surgeon would come in.

But when Mr. Lansdell walked slowly homeward after such a visit as this, there was generally a dissatisfied look upon his face, which was altogether inconsistent with the pleasure he had appeared to take in his wasted hour at Graybridge. He was inconsistent. It was in his nature, as a hero, to be so, no doubt. There were times when he forgot all about that yawning chasm of years which was supposed to divide him from any possibility of sympathy with Isabel Gilbert; there were times when he forgot himself so far as to be very young and happy in his loitering visits at Graybridge, playing idle scraps of extempore melody on the wizen old harpsichord, sketching little bunches of foliage and frail Italian

temples, and pretty girlish faces with big black eyes, not altogether unlike Isabel's, or strolling out into the flat old-fashioned garden, where Mr. Jeffson lolled on his spade, and made a rustic figure of himself, between a middle distance of brown earth and a foreground of cabbage-plants. I am bound to say that Mr. Jeffson, who was generally courtesy itself to every living creature, from the pigs to whom he carried savoury messes of skim-milk and specky potatoes, to the rector of Graybridge, who gave him "good-evening" sometimes as he reposed himself in the cool twilight upon the wooden gate leading into George Gilbert's stable-yard,—I am bound to say that Mr. Jeffson was altogether wanting in politeness to Roland Lansdell, and was apt to follow the young man with black and evil looks as he strolled by Izzie's side along the narrow walks, or stooped now and then to extricate her muslin dress from the thorny branches of a gooseberry-bush.

Once, and once only, did Isabel Gilbert venture to remonstrate with her husband's retainer on the subject of his surly manner to the master

of Mordred Priory. Her remonstrance was a very faint one, and she was stooping over a rose-bush while she talked, and was very busy plucking off the withered leaves, and now and then leaves that were not withered.

"I am afraid you don't like Mr. Lansdell, Jeff," she said. She had been very much attached to the gardener, and very confidential to him, before Roland's advent, and had done a little amateur gardening under his instructions, and had told him all about Eugene Aram and the murder of Mr. Clarke. "You seemed quite cross to him this morning when he called to see George, and to inquire about the man that had the rheumatic fever; I'm afraid you don't like him."

She bent her face very low over the rose-bush; so low that her hair, which, though much tidier than of old, was never quite as neatly or compactly adjusted as it might have been, fell forward like a veil, and entangled itself amongst the spiky branches.

"Oh, yes, Mrs. George; I like him well enough. There's not a young gentleman that I

ever set eyes on as I think nobler to look at, or pleasanter to talk to, than Mr. Lansdell, or more free and open-like in his manner to poor folk. But, like a many other good things, Mrs. George, Mr. Lansdell's only good, to my mind, when he's in his place; and I tell you, frank and candid, as I think he's never more out of his place than when he's hanging about yon house, or idling away his time in this garden. It isn't for me, Mrs. George, to say who should come here, and who shouldn't; but there was a kind of relationship between me and my master's dead mother. I can see her now, poor young thing, with her bright fair face, and her fair hair blowing across it, as she used to come towards me along the very pathway on which you're standing now, Mrs. George; and all that time comes back to me as if it was yesterday. I never knew any one lead a better or a purer life. I stood beside her deathbed, and I never saw a happier death, nor one that seemed to bring it closer home to a man's mind that there was something happier and better still to come afterwards. But there was

never no Mr. Roland Lansdell in those days, Mrs. George, scribbling heads with no bodies to 'em, and trees without any stumps, on scraps of paper, or playing tunes, or otherwise dawdling like, while my master was out o' doors. And I remember, as almost the last words that sweet young creature says, was something about having done her duty to her dear husband, and never having known one thought as she could wish to keep hid from him or Heaven."

Mrs. Gilbert dropped down on her knees before the rose-bush, with her face still shrouded by her hair, and her hands still busy among the leaves. When she looked up, which was not until after a lapse of some minutes, Mr. Jeffson was ever so far off, digging potatoes, with his back turned towards her. There had been nothing unkind in his manner of speaking to her; indeed there had even been a special kindness and tenderness in his tones, a sorrowful gentleness, that went home to her heart.

She thought of her husband's dead mother a good deal that night, in a reverential spirit, but

with a touch of envy also. Was not the first Mrs. Gilbert specially happy to have died young? was it not an enormous privilege so to die, and to be renowned ever afterwards as having done something meritorious, when, for the matter of that, other people would be very happy to die young if they could? Isabel thought of this with some sense of injury. Long ago, when her brothers had been rude to her, and her stepmother had upbraided her on the subject of a constitutional unwillingness to fetch butter, and "back" teaspoons, she had wished to die young, leaving a legacy of perpetual remorse to those unfeeling relatives. But the gods had never cared any thing about her. She had kept on wet boots sometimes after "backing" spoons in bad weather, in the fond hope that she might thereby fall into a decline. She had pictured herself in the little bedroom at Camberwell, fading by inches, with becoming hectic spots on her cheeks, and imploring her stepmother to call her early; which desire would have been the converse of the popular idea of the ruling passion, inasmuch as in her normal state of health

Miss Sleaford was wont to lie late of a morning, and remonstrate drowsily, with the voice of the sluggard, when roughly roused from some foolish dream, in which she wore a ruby-velvet gown that *wouldn't* keep hooked, and was beloved by a duke who was always inconsistently changing into the young man at the butter-shop.

All that evening Isabel pondered upon the simple history of her husband's mother, and wished that she could be very, very good like her, and die early with holy words upon her lips. But in the midst of such thoughts as these she found herself wondering whether the hands of Mr. Gilbert the elder were red and knobby like those of his son, whether he employed the same bootmaker, and entertained an equal predilection for spring-onions and Cheshire cheese. And from the picture of her deathbed Isabel tried in vain to blot away a figure that had no right to be there,—the figure of some one who would be fetched post-haste, at the last moment, to hear her dying words, and to see her die.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SECOND WARNING.

Mr. Roland Lansdell did not invite Lady Gwendoline or her father to that bachelor picnic which he was to give at Waverly Castle. He had a kind of instinctive knowledge that Lord Ruysdale's daughter would not relish that sylvan entertainment.

"She'd object to poor Smith, I daresay," Roland said to himself, "with his sporting-cut clothes and his slang-phrases, and his perpetual talk about three-volume novels and penny numbers. No, I don't think it would do to invite Gwendoline; she'd be sure to object to Smith."

Mr. Lansdell said this, or thought this, a good many times upon the day before the picnic; but it may be that there was a lurking idea in his mind that Lady Gwendoline might object to the presence of some one other than Mr. Smith in the

little assembly that had been planned under Lord Thurston's oak. Perhaps Roland Lansdell,—who hated hypocrisy as men who are by no means sinless are yet apt to hate the base and crawling vices of mankind,—had become a hypocrite all at once, and wanted to deceive himself; or it may be that the weak slope of his handsome chin, and the want of breadth in a certain region of his skull, were the outward and visible signs of such a weak and vacillating nature, that what was true with regard to him one minute was false the next; so that out of this perpetual changefulness of thought and purpose there grew a confusion in the young man's mind, like the murmur of many streamlets rushing into one broad river, along whose tide the feeble swimmer was drifted to the very sea he wanted so much to avoid.

"The picnic will be a pleasant thing for young Smith," Mr. Lansdell thought; "and it'll please the children to make themselves bilious amongst ruins; and that dear good Raymond always enjoys himself with young and happy people. I cannot see that the picnic can be any thing but

pleasant; and, for the matter of that, I've a good mind to send the baskets early by Stephens, who could make himself useful all day, and not go at all myself. I could run up to town under pretence of particular business, and amuse myself somehow for a day or two. Or, for that matter, I might go over to Baden or Hombourg, and finish the autumn there. Heaven knows I don't want to do any harm."

But, in spite of all this uncertainty and vacillation of mind, Mr. Lansdell took a great deal of interest in the preparations for the picnic. He did not trouble himself about the magnificent game-pie which was made for the occasion, the crust of which was as highly glazed as a piece of modern Wedgwood. He did not concern himself about the tender young fowls, nestling in groves of parsley; nor the tongue, floridly decorated with vegetable productions chiselled into the shapes of impossible flowers; nor the York ham, also in a high state of polish, like fine Spanish mahogany, and encircled about the knuckle by pure white fringes of cut paper.

The comestibles to which Mr. Lansdell directed his attention were of a more delicate and fairy-like description, such as women and children are apt to take delight in. There must be jellies and creams, Mr. Lansdell said, whatever difficulty there might be in the conveyance of such compositions. There must be fruit; he attended himself to the cutting of hothouse grapes and peaches, the noblest pine-apple in the long range of forcing-houses, and picturesque pears with leaves still clinging to the stalk. He ordered bouquets to be cut, one a very pyramid of choice flowers, chiefly white and innocent-looking; and he took care to select richly-scented blossoms, and he touched the big nosegay caressingly with his slim white fingers, and looked at it with a tender smile on his dark face, as if the flowers had a language for him,—and so they had; but it was by no means that stereotyped dictionary of substantives and adjectives popularly called the language of flowers.

It was nothing new for him to choose a bouquet. Had he not dispensed a small fortune

in the Rue de la Paix and in the Faubourg St. Honoré, in exchange for big bunches of roses and myosotis, and Cape-jasmine and waxy camellias: which he saw afterwards lying on the velvet cushion of an opera-box, or withering in the warm atmosphere of a boudoir? He was not a good man.—he had not led a good life. Pretty women had called him "Enfant!" in the dim mysterious shades of lamplit conservatories, upon the curtain-shrouded thresholds of moonlit balconies. Arch soubrettes in little Parisian theatres, bewitching Marthons and Margots and Jeannettons, with brooms in their hands and diamonds in their ears, had smiled at him, and acted at him, and sung at him, as he lounged in the dusky recesses of a cavernous box. He had not led a good life. He was not a good man. But he was a man who had never sinned with impunity. With him remorse always went hand-in-hand with wrong-doing. Heaven knows that I write of him in sober earnest and sincerity. I have seen and known him, or such as him. He is no lay-figure upon which I would

hang cheap commonplace moralities; but a creature of real flesh and blood, and mind and soul, whose picture I would paint—if I can. If he does not seem real after all, it is because my pen is feeble, and not because this man has not really lived and suffered, and sinned and repented.

In all his life, I doubt if there was any period in which Mr. Lansdell had ever so honestly and truly wished to do aright as he did just now. His mind seemed to have undergone a kind of purification in the still atmosphere of those fair Midlandshire glades and meads. There was even a purifying influence in the society of such a woman as Isabel Gilbert; so different from all the other women he had known, so deficient in the merest rudiments of worldly wisdom.

Mr. Lansdell did not go to London. When the ponderous old fly from Graybridge drove up a narrow winding lane and emerged upon the green rising ground below the gates of Waverly Castle, Roland was standing under the shadow

of the walls with a big bunch of hothouse flowers in his hand. He was in very high spirits; for to-day he had cast care to the winds. Why should he not enjoy this innocent pleasure of a rustic ramble with simple country-bred people and children? He laid some little stress upon the presence of the orphans. Yes, he would enjoy himself for to-day; and then to-morrow—ah! by the by, to-morrow Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert and Sigismund Smith were to dine with him. After to-morrow it would be all over, and he would be off to the Continent again, to begin the old wearisome rounds once more; to eat the same dinners at the same restaurants; the same little suppers after the opera, in stuffy entresol chambers, all crimson-velvet, and gaslight, and glass, and gilding; to go to the same balls in the same gorgeous saloons, and to see the same beautiful faces shining upon him in their monotonous splendour.

"I might have turned country gentleman, and have been good for something in this world," thought Roland Lansdell, "if—"

Mr. Lansdell was not alone. Charles Raymond and the orphans had arrived; and they all came forward together to welcome Isabel and her companions. Mr. Raymond had always been very kind to his nieces' governess, but he seemed especially kind to her to-day. He interposed himself between Roland and the door of the fly, and assisted Isabel to alight. He slipped her hand under his arm with a pleasant friendliness of manner, and looked with a triumphant smile at the rest of the gentlemen.

"I mean to appropriate Mrs. Gilbert for the whole of this day," he said cheerily; "and I shall give her a full account of Waverly, looked upon from an archæological, historical, and legendary point of view. Never mind your flowers now, Roland; it's a very charming bouquet, but you don't suppose Mrs. Gilbert is going to carry it about all day? Take it into the lodge yonder, and ask them to put it in water; and in the evening, if you're very good, Mrs. Gilbert shall take it home to ornament her parlour at Graybridge."

The gates were opened, and they went in; Isabel arm-in-arm with Mr. Raymond.

Roland placed himself presently on one side of Isabel; but Mr. Raymond was so very instructive about John of Gaunt and the Tudors, that all Mrs. Gilbert's attention was taken up in the effort to understand his discourse, which was very pleasant and lively, in spite of its instructive nature. George Gilbert looked at the ruins with the same awful respect with which he had regarded the pictures at Mordred. He was tolerably familiar with those empty halls, those roofless chambers, and open doorways, and ivy-festooned windows; but he always looked at them with the same reverence, mingled with a vague wonder as to what it was that people admired in ruins, seeing that they generally made such short work of inspecting them, and seemed so pleased to get away and take refreshment. Ruins and copious refreshment were associated in Mr. Gilbert's mind; and, indeed, there does seem to be a natural union between ivied walls and lobster-salad, crumbling turrets and cold

chicken; just as the domes of Greenwich Hospital, the hilly park beyond, and the rippling water in the foreground must be for ever and ever associated with flounder souchy and devilled whitebait. Mr. Sigismund Smith was delighted with Waverly. He had rambled amongst the ruins often enough in his boyhood; but to-day he saw every thing from a new point of view, and he groped about in all manner of obscure corners, with a pencil and pocket-book in his hand, laying the plan of a thrilling serial, and making himself irrecognisable with dust. His friends found him on one occasion stretched at full length amongst crisp fallen leaves in a recess that had once been a fireplace, with a view to ascertain whether it was long enough to accommodate a body. He climbed fearful heights, and planned perilous leaps and "hairbreadth 'scapes," deadly dangers in the way of walks along narrow cornices high up above empty space; such feats as hold the reader with suspended breath, and make the continued expenditure of his weekly penny almost a certainty.

The orphans accompanied Mr. Smith, and were delighted with the little chambers that they found in nooks and corners of the mouldering castle. How delightful to have chairs and tables and kitchen utensils, and to live there for ever and ever, and keep house for themselves! They envied the vulgar children who lived in the square tower by the gate, and saw ruins every day of their lives.

It was a very pleasant morning altogether. There was a strangely mingled feeling of satisfaction and annoyance in Roland Lansdell's mind, as he strolled beside Isabel, and listened, or appeared to listen, to Mr. Raymond's talk. He would like to have had Isabel's little hand lying lightly on *his* arm; he would like to have seen those wondering black eyes lifted to his face; he would like her to have heard the romantic legends belonging to the ruined walls and roofless banquet-chambers from him. And yet, perhaps, it was better as it was. He was going away very soon—immediately indeed; he was going where that simple pleasure would be impossible to him,

and it was better not to lull himself in soft delights that were so soon to be taken away from his barren life. Yes, his barren life. He had come to think of his fate with bitter repining, and to look upon himself as, somehow or other, cruelly ill-used by Providence.

But, in spite of Mr. Raymond, he contrived to sit next Isabel at dinner, which was served by and by in a lovely sheltered nook under the walls, where there was no chance of the salt being blown into the green-gage tart, or the custards spilt over the lobster-salad. Mr. Lansdell had sent a couple of servants to arrange matters; and the picnic was not a bit like an ordinary picnic, where things are lost and forgotten, and where there is generally confusion by reason of every body's desire to assist in the preparations. This was altogether a *recherché* banquet; but scarcely so pleasant as those more rural feasts, in which there is a paucity of tumblers, and no forks to speak of. The champagne was iced, the jellies quivered in the sunlight, every thing was in perfect order; and if Mr. Raymond had not

insisted upon sending away the two men, who wanted to wait at table, with the gloomy solemnity of everyday life, it would scarcely have been worthy the name of picnic. But with the two solemn servants out of the way, and with Sigismund, very red and dusty and noisy, to act as butler, matters were considerably improved.

The sun was low when they left the ruins of the feast for the two solemn men to clear away. The sun was low, and the moon had risen, so pale as to be scarcely distinguishable from a faint summer-cloud high up in the clear opal heaven. Mr. Raymond took Isabel up by a winding staircase to the top of a high turret, beneath which spread green meads and slopes of verdure, where once had been a lake and pleasaunce. The moon grew silvery before they reached the top of the turret, where there was room enough for a dozen people. Roland went with them, of course, and sat on one of the broad stone battlements looking out at the still night, with his profile defined as sharply as a cameo against the deepening blue of the sky. He was very silent, and his silence had

a distracting influence on Isabel, who made vain efforts to understand what Mr. Raymond was saying to her, and gave vague answers every now and then; so vague that Charles Raymond left off talking presently, and seemed to fall into as profound a reverie as that which kept Mr. Lansdell silent.

To Isabel's mind there was a pensive sweetness in that silence, which was in some way in harmony with the scene and the atmosphere. She was free to watch Roland's face now that Mr. Raymond had left off talking to her, and she did watch it; that still profile whose perfect outline grew more and more distinct against the moonlit sky. If any body could have painted his portrait as he sat there, with one idle hand hanging listless among the ivy-leaves, blanched in the moonlight, what a picture it would have made! What was he thinking of? Were his thoughts far away in some foreign city with dark-eyed Clotilde? or the Duchess with the glittering hair, who had loved him and been false to him long ago, when he was an alien, and recorded the history of his

woes in heart-breaking verse, in fitful numbers, larded with scraps of French and Latin, alternately despairing and sarcastic? Isabel solemnly believed in Clotilde and the glittering Duchess, and was steeped in self-abasement and humiliation when she compared herself with those vague and splendid creatures.

Roland spoke at last: if there had been any thing commonplace or worldly wise in what he said, there must have been a little revulsion in Isabel's mind; but his talk was happily attuned to the place and the hour; incomprehensible and mysterious,—like the deepening night in the heavens.

"I think there is a point at which a man's life comes to an end," he said. "I think there is a fitting and legitimate close to every man's existence, that is as palpable as the falling of a curtain when a play is done. He goes on living; that is to say, eating and drinking, and inhaling so many cubic feet of fresh air every day, for half a century afterwards, perhaps; but that is nothing. Do not the actors live after the play is

done, and the curtain has fallen? Hamlet goes home, and eats his supper, and scolds his wife and snubs his children; but the exaltation and the passion that created him Prince of Denmark have died out like the coke-ashes of the green-room fire. Surely that after-life is the penalty, the counter-balance, of brief golden hours of hope and pleasure. I am glad the Lansdells are not a long-lived race, Raymond; for I think the play is finished, and the dark curtain has dropped, for me!"

"Humph!" muttered Mr. Raymond; "wasn't there something to that effect in the *Alien*? It's very pretty, Roland,—that sort of dismal prettiness which is so much in fashion nowadays; but don't you think if you were to get up a little earlier in the morning, and spend a couple of hours amongst the stubble with your dogs and gun, so as to get an appetite for your breakfast, you might get over that sort of thing?"

Isabel turned a mutely reproachful gaze upon Mr. Raymond, but Roland burst out laughing.

"I daresay I talk like a fool," he said; "I feel like one sometimes."

"When are you going abroad again?"

"In a month's time. But why should I go abroad?" asked Mr. Lansdell, with a dash of fierceness in the sudden change of his tone; "why should I go? what is there for me to do there better than here? what good am I there more than I am here?" He asked these questions of the sky as much as of Mr. Raymond; and the philosopher of Conventford did not feel himself called upon to answer them. Mr. Lansdell relapsed into the silence that so puzzled Isabel; and nothing more was said until the voice of George Gilbert sounded from below, deeply sonorous amongst the walls and towers, calling to Isabel.

"I must go," she said; "I daresay the fly is ready to take us back. Good-night, Mr. Raymond; good-night, Mr. Lansdell."

She held out her hand, as if doubtful to whom she should first offer it; Roland had never changed his position until this moment, but he

started up suddenly now, like a man awakened from a dream. "You are going?" he said; "so soon!"

"So soon! it is very late, I think," Mrs. Gilbert answered; "at least, I mean we have enjoyed ourselves very much; and the time has passed so quickly."

She thought it was her duty to say something of this kind to him, as the giver of the feast; and then she blushed and grew confused, thinking she had said too much.

"Good-night, Mr. Lansdell."

"But I am coming down with you to the gate," said Roland; "do you think we could let you go down those slippery stairs by yourself, to fall and break your neck and haunt the tower by moonlight for ever afterwards, a pale ghost in shadowy muslin drapery? Here's Mr. Gilbert," he added, as the top of George's hat made itself visible upon the winding staircase; "but I'm sure I know the turret better than he does, and I shall take you under my care."

He took her hand as he spoke, and led her

down the dangerous winding-way as carefully and tenderly as if she had been a little child. Her hand did not tremble as it rested in his; but something like a mysterious winged creature that had long been imprisoned in her breast, seemed to break its bonds all at once, and float away from her towards him. She thought it was her long-imprisoned soul, perhaps, that so left her to become a part of his. If that slow downward journey could have lasted for ever—if she could have gone down, down, down with Roland Lansdell into some fathomless pit, until at last they came to a luminous cavern and still moonlit water, where there was a heavenly calm—and death! But the descent did not last very long, careful as Roland was of every step; and there was the top of George's hat bobbing about in the moonlight all the time; for the surgeon had lost his way in the turret, and only came down at last very warm and breathless when Isabel called to him from the bottom of the stairs.

Sigismund and the orphans appeared at the same moment. Mr. Raymond had followed Ro-

land and Isabel very closely, and they all went together to the fly.

"Remember to-morrow," Mr. Lansdell said generally to the Graybridge party as they took their seats. "I shall expect you as soon as the afternoon service is over. I know you are regular church-goers at Graybridge. Couldn't you come to Mordred for the afternoon service, by the by? —the church is well worth seeing." There was a little discussion; and it was finally agreed that Mr. and Mrs. George Gilbert and Sigismund should go to Mordred church on the following afternoon; and then there was a good deal of hand-shaking before the carriage drove away, and disappeared behind the sheltering hedges that screened the winding road.

"I'll see you and the children off, Raymond," Mr. Lansdell said, "before I go myself."

"I'm not going away just this minute," Mr. Raymond answered gravely; "I want to have a little talk with you first. There's something I particularly want to say to you. Mrs. Primshaw," he cried to the landlady of a little inn just

opposite the castle-gates, a good-natured rosy-faced young woman, who was standing on the threshold of her door watching the movements of the gentlefolks, "will you take care of my little girls, and see whether their wraps are warm enough for the drive home, while I take a moonlight stroll with Mr. Lansdell?"

Mrs. Primshaw declared that nothing would give her greater pleasure than to see to the comfort of the young ladies. So the orphans skipped across the moonlit road, nowise sorry to take shelter in the pleasant bar-parlour, all rosy and luminous with a cosy handful of bright fire in the tiniest grate ever seen out of a doll's-house.

Mr. Lansdell and Mr. Raymond walked along the lonely road under the shadow of the castle-wall, and for some minutes neither of them spoke. Roland evinced no curiosity about, or interest in, that unknown something which Mr. Raymond had to say to him; but there was a kind of dogged sullenness in the carriage of his head, the fixed expression of his face, that seemed to promise badly for the pleasantness of the interview.

Perhaps Mr. Raymond saw this, and was rather puzzled how to commence the conversation; at any rate, when he did begin, he began very abruptly, taking what one might venture to call a conversational header.

"Roland," he said, "this won't do!"

"What won't do?" asked Mr. Lansdell, coolly.

"Of course, I don't set up for being your Mentor," returned Mr. Raymond, "or for having any right to lecture you, or dictate to you. The tie of kinsmanship between us is a very slight one; though, as far as that goes, God knows that I could scarcely love you better than I do, if I were your father. But if I *were* your father, I don't suppose you'd listen to me, or heed me. Men never do, in such matters as these. I've lived my life, Roland, and I know too well how little good advice can do in such a case as this. But I can't see you going wrong without trying to stop you: and for that poor, honest-hearted fellow yonder, for his sake, I must speak, Roland. Have you any consciousness of the mischief you're doing? have you any knowledge of the bottom-

less pit of sin, and misery, and shame, and horror that you are digging before that foolish woman's feet?"

"Why, Raymond," cried Mr. Lansdell, with a laugh,—not a very hearty laugh, but something like that hollow mockery of merriment with which a man greets the narration of some old Joe-Millerism that has been familiar to him from his childhood,—"why, Raymond, you're as obscure as a modern poet! What do you mean? Who's the honest-hearted fellow? and who's the foolish woman? and what's the nature of the business altogether?"

"Roland, let us be frank with each other, at least. Do you remember how you told me once that, when every bright illusion had dropped away from you one by one, honour still remained, —a poor pallid star, compared to those other lights that had perished in the darkness, but still bright enough to keep you in the straight road? Has that last light gone out with the rest, Roland, my poor melancholy boy,—my boy whom I have loved as my own child?—will the day ever come

when I shall have to be ashamed of Anna Lansdell's only son?"

His mother's name had always something of a spell for Roland. His head, so proudly held before, drooped suddenly, and he walked on in silence for some little time. Mr. Raymond was also silent. He had drawn some good augury from the altered carriage of the young man's head, and was loth to disturb the current of his thoughts. When Roland did at last raise his head, he turned and looked his friend and kinsman full in the face.

"Raymond," he said, "I am not a good man;" he was very fond of making this declaration, and I think he fancied that in so doing he made some vague atonement for his shortcomings; "I am not a good man, but I am no hypocrite; I will not lie to you, or prevaricate with you. Perhaps there may be some justification for what you said just now, or there might be if I were a different sort of man. But, as it is, I give you my honour you are mistaken. I have been digging no pit for a woman's inno-

cent footsteps to stray into. I have been plotting no treachery against that honest fellow yonder. Remember, I do not by any means hold myself blameless. I have admired Mrs. Gilbert just as one admires a pretty child, and I have allowed myself to be amused by her sentimental talk, and have lent her books, and may perhaps have paid her a little more attention than I ought to have done. But I have done nothing deliberately. I have never for one moment had any purpose in my mind, or mixed her image with so much as a dream of—of—any tangible form. I have drifted into a dangerous position, or a position that might be dangerous to another man; but I can drift out of it as easily as I drifted in. I shall leave Midlandshire next month."

"And to-morrow the Gilberts dine with you at Mordred; and all through this month there will be the chance of your seeing Mrs. Gilbert, and lending her more books, and paying her more attention; and so on. It is not so much that I doubt you, Roland; I cannot think so meanly of you as to doubt your honour in this business.

But you are doing mischief; you are turning this silly girl's head. It is no kindness to lend her books; it is no kindness to invite her to Mordred, and to show her brief glimpses of a life that never can be hers. If you want to do a good deed, and to elevate her life out of its present dead level, make her your almoner, and give her a hundred a year to distribute amongst her husband's poor patients. The weak unhappy child is perishing for want of some duty to perform upon this earth; some necessary task to keep her busy from day to day, and to make a link between her husband and herself. Roland, I do believe that you are as good and generous-minded a fellow as ever an old bachelor was proud of. My dear boy, let me feel prouder of you than I have ever felt yet. Leave Midlandshire to-morrow morning. It will be easy to invent some excuse for going. Go to-morrow, Roland."

"I will," answered Mr. Lansdell, after a brief pause; "I will go, Raymond," he repeated, holding out his hand, and clasping that of his friend. "I suppose I *have* been going a little astray

lately; but I only wanted the voice of a true-hearted fellow like you to call me back to the straight road. I shall leave Midlandshire to-morrow, Raymond; and it may be a very long time before you see me back again."

"Heaven knows I'm sorry enough to lose you, my boy," Mr. Raymond said with some emotion; "but I feel that it's the only thing for you to do. I used sometimes to think, before George Gilbert offered to marry Isabel, that you and she would have been suited to each other somehow; and I have wished that—"

And here Mr. Raymond stopped abruptly, feeling that this speech was scarcely the wisest he could have made.

But Roland Lansdell took no notice of that unlucky observation.

"I shall go to-morrow," he repeated. "I'm very glad you've spoken to me, Raymond; I thank you most heartily for the advice you have given me this night; and I shall go to-morrow."

And then his mind wandered away to his boyish studies in mythical Roman history; and

he wondered how Marcus Curtius felt just after making up his mind to take the leap that made him famous. And then, with a sudden slip from ancient to modern history, he thought of poor tender-hearted Louise la Vallière running away and hiding herself in a convent, only to have her pure thoughts and aspirations scattered like a cluster of frail wood-anemones in a storm of wind —only to have her holy resolutions trampled upon by the ruthless foot of an impetuous young king.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN!

Mrs. Gilbert spoke very little during the homeward drive through the moonlight. In her visions of that drive—or what that drive might be—she had fancied Roland Lansdell riding by the carriage-window, and going a few miles out of his way in order to escort his friends back to Graybridge.

"If he cared to be with us, he would have come," Isabel thought, with a pensive reproachful feeling about Mr. Lansdell.

It is just possible that Roland might have ridden after the fly from Graybridge, and ridden beside it along the quiet country roads, talking as he only in all the world could talk, according to Mrs. Gilbert's opinion. It is possible that, being so sorely at a loss as to what he

should do with himself, Mr. Lansdell might have wasted an hour thus, had he not been detained by his old friend Charles Raymond.

As it was, he rode straight home to Mordred Priory, very slowly, thinking deeply as he went along; thinking bitter thoughts about himself and his destiny.

"If my cousin Gwendoline had been true to me, I should have been an utterly different man," he thought; "I should have been a middle-aged steady-going fellow by this time, with a boy at Eton, and a pretty fair-haired daughter to ride her pony by my side. I think I might have been good for something if I had married long ago, when my mother died, and my heart was ready to shelter the woman she had chosen for me. Children! A man who has children has some reason to be good, and to do his duty. But to stand quite alone in a world that one has grown tired of; with every pleasure exhausted, and every faith worn threadbare; with a dreary waste of memory behind, a barren desert of empty years before;—

to be quite alone in the world, the last of a race that once was brave and generous; the feeble worn-out remnant of a lineage that once did great deeds, and made a name for itself in this world;—that indeed is bitter!"

Mr. Lansdell's thoughts dwelt upon his loneliness to-night, as they had never dwelt before, since the day when his mother's death and cousin's inconstancy first left him lonely.

"Yes, I shall go abroad again," he thought presently, "and go over the old dreary beat once more — like Marryat's phantom captain turned landsman, like the Wandering Jew in a Poole-built travelling-dress. I shall eat fish at Philippe's again, and buy more bouquets in the Rue Castiglione, and lose more money at Hombourg, and shoot more crocodiles on the banks of the Nile, and be laid up with another fever in the Holy Land. It will be all the same over again, except that it will be a great deal more tiresome this time."

And then Mr. Lansdell began to think what his life might have been, if the woman he

loved, or rather the woman for whom he had a foolish sentimental fancy,—he did not admit to himself that his predilection for Isabel Gilbert was more than this,—had been free to become his wife. He imagined himself returning from those tiresome Continental wanderings a twelvemonth earlier than he had actually returned. Had he not been on the point of so doing half-a-dozen times? and had changed that ever-changing mind of his again and again — now turning his face homeward for a time, now wandering farther a-field; always uncertain and dissatisfied and restless; tired of himself and the wonderful universe, from off which all the gloss of novelty had been worn long ago. He imagined himself coming back to Midlandshire a twelvemonth sooner. "Ah, me!" he thought, "only one little year earlier, and all things would have been different!" He would have gone to Conventford to see his dear old friend George Raymond, and there, in the sunny drawing-room, he would have found a pale-faced, dark-eyed girl bending over a child's

lesson-book, or listening while a child strummed on the piano. He could fancy that scene,—he could see it all, like a beautiful cabinet-picture; ah, how different, how different every thing would have been then! It would have been no sin then to be inexplicably happy in that girlish presence; there would have been no vague remorseful pang, no sting of self-reproach, mingling with every pleasant emotion, contending with every thrill of mystic joy. And then — and then, some night in the twilit garden, when the stars were hovering dim about the city-roofs still and hushed in the distance, he would have told her that he loved her; that, after a decade of indifference to all the brightest things of earth, he had found a pure unutterable happiness in the hope and belief that she would be his wife. He fancied her shy blushes, her drooping eyes suddenly tearful in the depth of her joy; and he fancied what his life might have been for ever a terwards, transformed and sublimated by its new purpose, its new delights; transfigured by a pure and exalted affection. He fancied

all this as it all might have been; and turned and bowed his face before an image that bore his own likeness, and yet was not himself—the image of a good man, happy husband and father, true friend and gentle master, dwelling for ever and ever amidst that peaceful English landscape; beloved, respected, the centre of a happy circle, the key-stone of a fair domestic arch,—a necessary link in the grand chain of human love and life.

"And instead of all this, I am a wandering nomad, who never has been, and never can be, of any use in this world; who fills no place in life, and will leave no blank when he dies. When Louis the Well-beloved was disinclined for the chase, the royal huntsmen were wont to announce that to-day his majesty would do nothing. I have been doing nothing all my life, and cannot even rejoice in a stag-hunt."

Mr. Lansdell beguiled his homeward way with many bitter reflections of this kind. But, inconsistent and vacillating in his thoughts, as he had been ever inconsistent and vacillating in his

actions, he thought of himself at one time as being deeply and devotedly in love with Isabel Gilbert, and at another time as being only the victim of a foolish romantic fancy, which would perish by a death as speedy as its birth.

"What an idiot I am for my pains!" he said to himself presently. "In six weeks' time this poor child's pale face will have no more place in my mind than the snows of last winter have on this earth, or only in far-away nooks and corners of memory, like the Alpine peaks, where the snows linger undisturbed by the hand of change. Poor little girl! how she blushes and falters sometimes when she speaks to me, and how pretty she looks then! If they could get such an Ingénue at the Français, all Paris would be mad about her. We are very much in love with each other, I daresay; but I don't think it's a passion to outlast six weeks' absence on either side, not on her side certainly, dear romantic child! I have only been the hero of a story-book; and all this folly has been nothing more than a page out of a novel set in action. Raymond is very right. I

must go away; and she will go back to her three-volume novels, and fall in love with a fair-haired hero, and forget me."

He sighed as he thought this. It was infinitely better that he should be forgotten, and speedily; and yet it is hard to have *no* place in the universe—not even one hidden shrine in a foolish woman's heart. Mr. Lansdell was before the Priory gates by this time. The old woman stifled a yawn as she admitted the master of the domain. He went in past the little blinking light in the narrow Gothic window, and along the winding roadway, between cool shrubberies that shed an aromatic perfume on the still night-air. Scared fawns flitted ghost-like away into deep recesses amid the Mordred oaks; and in the distance the water-drops of a cascade, changed by the moonbeams into showers of silver, fell with a little tinkling sound amongst great blocks of moss-grown granite and wet fern.

Mordred Priory, seen in the moonlight, was not a place upon which a man would willingly turn his back. Long ago Roland Lansdell had

grown tired of its familiar beauties; but to-night the scene seemed transformed. He looked at it with a new interest; he thought of it with a sad tender regret, that stung him like a physical pain.

As he had thought of what his life might have been under other circumstances, he thought now of what the place might have been. He fancied the grand old rooms resonant with the echoes of children's voices; he pictured one slender white-robed figure on the moonlit terrace; he fancied a tender earnest face turned steadily towards the path along which he rode; he felt the thrilling contact of a caressing arm twining itself shyly in his; he heard the low murmur of a loving voice —his wife's voice!—bidding him welcome home.

But it was never to be! The watch-dog's honest bark—or rather the bark of several watch-dogs—made the night clamorous presently, when Mr. Lansdell drew rein before the porch; but there was no eye to mark his coming, and be brighter when he came; unless, indeed, it was the eye of his valet, which had waxed dim over

the columns of the *Morning Post*, and may have glimmered faintly in evidence of that functionary's satisfaction at the prospect of being speedily released from duty.

If it was so, the valet was doomed to disappointment; for Mr. Lansdell—usually the least troublesome of masters—wanted a great deal done for him to-night.

"You may set to work at once with my portmanteau, Jadis," he said, when he met his servant in the hall. "I must leave Mordred to-morrow morning in time for the seven-o'clock express from Warncliffe. I want you to pack my things, and arrange for Wilson to be ready to drive me over. I must leave here at six. Perhaps, by the by, you may as well pack one portmanteau for me to take with me, and you can follow with the rest of the luggage on Monday."

"You are going abroad, sir?"

"Yes, I am tired of Mordred. I shall not stop for the hunting-season. You can go upstairs now and pack the portmanteau. Don't forget to make all arrangements about the carriage; for

six precisely. You can go to bed when you've finished packing. I've some letters to write, and shall be late."

The man bowed and departed, to grumble, in an undertone, over Mr. Lansdell's shirts and waistcoats, while Roland went into the library to write his letters.

How blank the room seemed! how empty and lonely! It was no new thing for him to find that handsome chamber tenantless, and to sit down alone in the stillness and the lamplight, to brood over his books, when the household was at rest. It was no new thing for him to sit alone; and yet to-night he felt his desolation as keenly as a young widower newly mourning the loss of an idolised wife. Had he not suffered himself to dream of a life that was different from this life? He had peopled that empty chamber with a vision that had made it luminous; and now, remembering that the dream was only a dream, and never, never could be more, he felt almost as sharp a pang as if he had been mourning for the dead.

The letters which he had to write turned out to be only one letter, or rather a dozen variations upon the same theme, which he tore up, one after another, almost as soon as they were written. He was not wont to be so fastidious in the wording of his epistles, but to-night he could not be satisfied with what he wrote. He wrote to Mrs. Gilbert; yes, to her! Why should he not write to her when he was going away to-morrow morning; when he was going to offer up that vague bright dream which had lately beguiled him, a willing sacrifice, on the altar of duty and honour?

"I am not much good," he said: for ever excusing his shortcomings by his self-depreciation. "I never set up for being a good man; but I have some feeling of honour left in me at the worst." He wrote to Isabel, therefore, rather than to her husband, and he destroyed many letters before he wrote what he fancied suitable to the occasion. Did not the smothered tenderness, the regret, the passion, reveal itself in some of those letters, in spite of his own determination

to be strictly conventional and correct ? But the letter which he wrote last was stiff and commonplace enough to have satisfied the sternest moralist.

"Dear Mrs. Gilbert,—I much regret that circumstances, which only came to my knowledge after your party left last night, will oblige me to leave Mordred early to-morrow morning. I am therefore compelled to forego the pleasure which I had anticipated from our friendly little dinner to-morrow evening; but pray assure Smith that the Priory is entirely at his disposal whenever he likes to come here, and that he is welcome to make it the scene of half-a-dozen fictions, if he pleases. I fear the old place will soon look gloomy and desolate enough to satisfy his ideas of the romantic, for it may be some years before I again see the Midlandshire woods and meadows."

("The dear old bridge across the waterfall, the grand old oak under which I have spent such pleasant hours," Mr. Lansdell had written here in one of the letters which he destroyed.)

"I hope you will convey to Mr. Gilbert my warmest thanks, with the accompanying cheque, for the kindness and skill which have endeared him to my cottagers. I shall be very glad if he will continue to look after them, and I will arrange for the carrying out of any sanitary improvements he may suggest to Hodgeson, my steward.

"The library will be always prepared for you whenever you feel inclined to read and study there, and the contents of the shelves will be entirely at the service of yourself and Mr. Gilbert.

"With regards to your husband, and all friendly wishes for Smith's prosperity and success,

"I remain, dear Mrs. Gilbert,

"Very truly yours,

"ROLAND LANSDELL.

"*Mordred Priory, Saturday night.*"

"It may be some years before I again see the Midlandshire woods and meadows!" This sentence was the gist of the letter, the stiff unmeaning letter, which was as dull and laboured

as a schoolboy's holiday missive to his honoured parents.

"My poor, innocent, tender-hearted darling! will she be sorry when she reads it?" thought Mr. Lansdell, as he addressed his letter. "Will this parting be a new grief to her, a shadowy romantic sorrow, like her regret for drowned Shelley, or fever-stricken Byron? My darling, my darling! if fate had sent me here a twelvemonth earlier, you and I might have been standing side by side in the moonlight, talking of the happy future before us. Only a year! and there were so many accidents that might have caused my return. Only one year! and in that little space I lost my one grand chance of happiness."

Mr. Lansdell had done his duty. He had given Charles Raymond a promise which he meant to keep; and having done so, he gave his thoughts and fancies a license which he had never allowed them before. He no longer struggled to retain the attitude from which he had hitherto endeavoured to regard Mrs. Gilbert. He no longer considered it his duty to think of her as a pretty,

grown-up child, whose childish follies amused him for the moment. No; he was going away now, and had no longer need to set any restraint upon his thoughts. He was going away, and was free to acknowledge to himself that this love which had grown up so suddenly in his breast was the one grand passion of his life, and, under different circumstances, might have been his happiness and redemption.

CHAPTER VIII.

"OCEANS SHOULD DIVIDE US."

Mr. and Mrs. Gilbert went to church arm-in-arm as usual on the morning after the picnic; but Sigismund stayed at home to sketch the rough outline of that feudal romance which he had planned among the ruins of Waverly. The day was very fine,—a real summer-day, with a blazing sun and a cloudless blue sky. The sunshine seemed like a good omen, Mrs. Gilbert thought, as she dressed herself in the white-muslin robe that she was to wear at Mordred. An omen of what? She did not ask herself that question; but she was pleased to think that the heavens should smile upon her visit to Mordred. She was thinking of the dinner at the Priory while she sat by her husband's side in church, looking demurely down at the Prayer-Book in her lap. It

was a common thing for her now to be thinking of *him* when she ought to have been attending to the sermon. To-day she did not even try to listen to the rector's discourse. She was fancying herself in the dusky drawing-room at Mordred, after dinner, hearing *him* talk. She saw his face turned towards her in the twilight—the pale dark face — the dreamy, uncertain eyes. When the congregation rose suddenly, at the end of the sermon, she sat bewildered for a moment, like a creature awakened from a dream; and when the people knelt, and became absorbed in silent meditation on the injunctions of their pastor, Mrs. Gilbert remained so long in a devotional attitude, that her husband was fain to arouse her by a gentle tap upon the shoulder. She had been thinking of *him* even on her knees. She could not shut his image from her thoughts; she walked about in a perpetual dream, and rarely awakened to the consciousness that there was wickedness in so dreaming; and even when she did reflect upon her sin, it was very easy to excuse it and make light of it. *He* would never know. In November

he would be gone, and the dream would be nothing but a dream.

It was only one o'clock, by the old-fashioned eight-day clock in the passage, when they went home after church. The gig was to be ready at a quarter before three, and at that hour they were to start for Mordred. George meant to put-up his horse at the little inn near the Priory gates, and then they could walk quietly from the church to Mr. Lansdell's after the service. Mr. Gilbert felt that Brown Molly appeared rather at a disadvantage in Roland's grand stables.

Sigismund was still sitting in the little parlour, looking very warm, and considerably the worse for ink. He had tried all the penny bottles in the course of his labours, and had a little collection of them clustered at his elbow.

"I don't think any one ever imagined so many ink-bottles compatible with so little ink," he said, plaintively. "I've had my best ideas balked by perpetual hairs in my pen, to say nothing of flies' wings, and even bodies. There's nothing like unlimited ink for imparting fluency

to a man's language; you cut short his eloquence the moment you limit his ink. However, I'm down here for pleasure, old fellow," Mr. Smith added, cheerfully; "and all the printing-machines in the city of London may be waiting for copy for aught I care."

An hour and three-quarters must elapse before it would be time even to start for Mordred. Mrs. Gilbert went upstairs and rearranged her hair, and looked at herself in the glass, and wondered if she was pretty. *He* had never told her so. He had never paid her any compliment. But she fancied, somehow, that he thought her pretty, though she had no idea whence that fancy was derived. She went downstairs again, and out into the garden, whence Mr. Smith was calling to her—the little garden in front of the house, where there were a few common flowers blooming dustily in oval beds like dishes; and where, in a corner, there was an erection of shells and broken bits of coloured glass, which Mr. Jeffson fondly imagined to be the exact representation of a grotto.

Mr. Smith had a good deal to say for himself,

as indeed he had on all occasions; but as his discourse was entirely of a personal character, it may have been rather wanting in general interest. Isabel strolled up and down the narrow pathway by his side, and turned her face politely towards him, and said, "Yes," and "Did you really!" and "Well, how very strange!" now and then. But she was thinking as she had thought in church; she was thinking of the wonderful happiness that lay before her,—an evening in *his* companionship, amongst pictures and hothouse flowers and marble busts and trailing silken curtains, and with glimpses of a moonlit expanse of lawn and shrubbery gleaming through every open window.

She was thinking of this when a bell rang loud and shrill in her ear; and looking round suddenly she saw a man in livery—a man who looked like a groom—standing outside the garden-gate.

She was so near the gate that it would have been a mere affectation to keep the man waiting there while Mrs. Jeffson made her way from the

remote premises at the back of the house. The Doctor's Wife turned the key in the lock and opened the gate; but the man only wanted to deliver a letter, which he handed her with one hand while he touched the brim of his hat with the other.

"From Mr. Lansdell, ma'am," he said.

In the next moment he was gone, and the open gate and the white dusty lane seemed to reel before Isabel Gilbert's eyes.

There had been no need for the man to tell her that the letter was from his master. She knew the bold dashing hand, in which she had read pencil annotations upon the margins of those books which Mr. Lansdell had lent her. And even if she had not known the hand, she would have easily guessed whence the letter came. Who else should write so grand-looking a missive, with that thick cream-coloured envelope (a big official-looking envelope), and the broad coat-of-arms with tall winged supporters on the seal? But why should he have written to her? It was to put off the dinner, no doubt. Her lips

trembled a little, like the lips of a child who is going to cry, as she opened the letter.

She read it very hurriedly twice, and then all at once comprehended that Roland was going away for some years,—for ever,—it was all the same thing; and that she would never, never, never, never,—the word seemed to repeat itself in her brain like the dreadful clanging of a bell —never see him again!

She knew that Sigismund was looking at her, and asking her some question about the contents of the letter. "What did Lansdell say? was it a put-off, or what?" Mr. Smith demanded; but Isabel did not answer him. She handed him the open letter, and then, suddenly turning from him, ran into the house, upstairs, and into her room. She locked the door, flung herself face downwards upon the bed, and wept as a woman weeps in the first great agony of her life. The sound of those passionate sobs was stifled by the pillows amidst which her face was buried, but the anguish of them shook her from head to foot. It was very wicked to have thought of him so

much, to have loved him so dearly. The punishment of her sin came to her all at once, and was very bitter.

Mr. Smith stood for some moments staring at the doorway through which Isabel had disappeared, with the open letter in his hand, and his face a perfect blank in the intensity of his amazement.

"I suppose it *is* a put-off," he said to himself; "and she's disappointed because we're not going. Why, what a child she is still! I remember her behaving just like that once at Camberwell, when I'd promised her tickets for the play, and couldn't get 'em. The manager of the T. R. D. L. said he didn't consider the author of *The Brand upon the Shoulder-blade* entitled to the usual privilege. Poor little Izzie! I remember her running away, and not coming back for ever so long; and when she did make her appearance, her eyelids were all red and swollen."

Mr. Smith stooped to pick up a narrow slip of lavender-tinted paper from the garden-walk. It was the cheque which Roland Lansdell had

written in payment of the Doctor's services. Sigismund read the letter, and reflected over it.

"I'm almost as much disappointed as Izzie, for the matter of that," he thought to himself; "we should have had a jolly good dinner at the Priory, and any amount of sparkling; and Chateau what's-its-name and Clos de thingamy to follow, I daresay. I'll take George the letter and the cheque—it's just like Izzie to leave the cheque on the ground—and resign myself to a dullish Sunday."

It was a dull Sunday. The unacademical "ish" with which Mr. Smith had qualified the adjective was quite unnecessary. It was a very dull Sunday. Ah, reader, if Providence has some desperate sorrow in store for you, pray that it may not befall you on a Sunday, in the blazing sunshine, when the church-bells are ringing on the still drowsy air. Mr. Gilbert went upstairs by and by, when the bells were at their loudest, and, finding the door of his chamber locked, knocked on the panel, and asked Isabel if she did not mean to go to church. But she told

him she had a dreadful headache, and wanted to stay at home. He asked her ever so many questions, as to why her head ached, and how long it had ached, and wanted to see her, from a professional point of view.

"Oh, no, no!" she cried, from the bed upon which she was lying; "I don't want any medicine; I only want to rest my head; I was asleep when you knocked."

Ah, what a miserable falsehood that was! as if she could ever hope to sleep again!

"But, Izzie," remonstrated Mr. Gilbert, "you've had no dinner. There's cold lamb, you know; and we're going to have that and a salad after church. You'll come down to dinner, eh?"

"No, no; I don't want any dinner. Please, leave me alone. I *only* want to rest," she answered piteously.

Poor honest George Gilbert little knew how horrible an effort it had cost his wife to utter even these brief sentences without breaking down in a passion of sobbing and weeping. She buried her face in the pillows again as her husband's

footsteps went slowly down the narrow stairs. She was very wretched, very foolish. It was only a dream—nothing more than a dream—that was lost to her. Again, had she not known all along that Roland Lansdell would go away, and that all her bright dreams and fancies must go with him? Had she not counted upon his departure? Yes; but in November, not in September; not on the day that was to have been such a happy day.

"Oh, how cruel, how cruel!" she thought. "How cruel of him to go away like that! without even saying good-by,—without even saying he was sorry to go. And I fancied that he liked to talk to me; I fancied that he was pleased to see me sometimes, and would be sorry when the time came for him to go away. But to think that he should go away two months before the time he spoke of,—to think that he should not even be sorry to go!"

Mrs. Gilbert got up by and by, when the western sky was all one lurid glow of light and colour. She got up because there was little peace

for a weary spirit in that chamber; to the door of which some considerate creature came every half-hour or so to ask Isabel if her head was any better by this time, if she would have a cup of tea, if she would come downstairs and lie on the sofa, and to torment her with many other thoughtful inquiries of the like nature. She was not to be alone with her great sorrow. Sooner or later she must go out and begin life again, and face the blank world in which *he* was not. Better, since it must be so, that she should begin her dreary task at once. She bathed her face and head, she plaited her long black hair before the little glass, behind which the lurid sky glared redly at her. Ah, how often in the sunny morning she had stood before that shabby old-fashioned glass thinking of him, and the chance of meeting him beside the mill-stream, under the flickering shadows of the oak-leaves at Thurston's Crag! And now it was all over, and she would never, never, never, never see him again! Her life was finished. Ah, how truly he had spoken on the battlements of the ruined tower! and how

bitterly the meaning of his words came home to her to-day! Her life was finished. The curtain had fallen, and the lights were out; and she had nothing more to do but to grope blindly about upon a darkened stage until she sank in the great vampire-trap — the grave. A pale ghost, with sombre shadowy hair, looked back at her from the glass. Oh, if she could die, if she could die! She thought of the mill-stream. The wheel would be idle; and the water low down in the hollow beyond the miller's cottage would be still to-night, still and placid and glassy, shining rosy red in the sunset like the pavement of a cathedral stained with the glory of a painted window. Why should she not end her sorrows for ever in that glassy pool, so deep, so tranquil? She thought of Ophelia, and the miller's daughter on the banks of Allan Water. Would she be found floating on the stream, with weeds of water-lilies tangled in her long dark hair? Would she look pretty when she was dead? Would *he* be sorry when he heard of her death? Would he read a paragraph in the newspapers some morning at

breakfast, and break a blood-vessel into his coffee-cup? Or would he read and not care? Why should he care? If he had cared for her, he could never have gone away, he could never have written that cruel formal letter, with not a word of regret—no, not one. Vague thoughts like these followed one another in her mind. If she could have the courage to go down to the water's brink, and to drop quietly into the stream where Roland Lansdell had once told her it was deepest? It was not any consciousness of the suicide's sin that held this ignorant girl back from the desperate deed, which took a soft and sentimental shape in her mind. It was only a shuddering horror of the plunge, a vague and shapeless terror of the "something after," familiar to every creature who ponders (even in the most frivolous spirit) upon Hamlet's solemn question; it was only dim fear and apprehension that saved this girl from the rash impulse of her sorrow-stricken heart. I know that she was alike wicked and silly; I know that it must be difficult to win sympathy for a grief so foolish, an anguish so self-engendered;

but her sorrow was none the less real to her because it seems foolish in the eyes of wisdom. It was not so long since she had lain awake for many weary nights weeping for the death of a pet spaniel; it was not so long since she had gone to bed sorrowful because the second volume of one of her favourite romances was unobtainable at the little Camberwell library. All the sterner business of life lay before her as yet, all the harder lessons yet remained to be learned.

She went downstairs by and by, in the dusk, with her face as white as the tumbled muslin that hung about her in limp and flabby folds. She went down into the little parlour, where George and Sigismund were waiting for their tea, and where two yellow mould-candles were flaring in the faint evening breeze.

She told them that her head was better; and then began to make the tea, scooping up vague quantities of congou and gunpowder with the little silver scollop-shell, which had belonged to Mr. Gilbert's grandmother, and was stamped with a puffy profile of George the Third.

"But you've been crying, Izzie!" George exclaimed presently, for Mrs. Gilbert's eyelids looked red and swollen in the light of the candles.

"Yes, my head was so bad it made me cry; but please don't ask me any more about it," Isabel pleaded piteously. "I suppose it was the p-picnic"—she nearly broke down upon the word, remembering how good *he* had been to her all through the happy day—"yesterday that made me ill."

"I daresay it was that lobster-salad," Mr. Gilbert answered briskly; "I ought to have told you not to eat it. I don't think there's any thing more bilious than lobster-salad dressed with cream."

Sigismund Smith watched his hostess with a grave countenance, while she poured out the tea and handed the cups right and left. Poor Isabel managed it all with tolerable steadiness; and then, when the miserable task was over, she sat by the window alone, staring blankly out at the dusty shrubs distinct in the moonlight, while her husband and his friend smoked their cigars in the lane outside.

How was she to bear her life in that dull dusty lane—her odious life, which would go on and on for ever, like a slow barge crawling across dreary flats upon the black tideless waters of a canal? How was she to endure it? All its monotony, all its misery, its shabby dreariness, its dreary shabbiness, rose up before her with redoubled force; and the terror of that hideous existence smote her like a stroke from a giant's hand.

It all came back. Yes, it came back. For the last two months it had ceased to be; it had been blotted out, hidden, forgotten; there had been no such thing. An enchanter's wand had been waved above that dreary square-built house in the dusty lane, and a fairy palace had arisen for her habitation; a fairyland of beauty and splendour had spread itself around her, a paradise in which she wandered hand in hand with a demigod. The image of Roland Lansdell had filled her life, to the exclusion of every other shape, animate or inanimate. But the fairyland melted away all at once, like a mirage in the desert; like the last scene of a pantomime, the

rosy and cerulean lights went out in foul sulphurous vapours. The mystic domes and minarets melted into thin air; but the barren sands remained real and dreary, stretching away for ever and for ever before the wanderer's weary feet.

In all Mrs. Gilbert's thoughts there was no special horror or aversion of her husband. He was only a part of the dulness of her life; he was only one dreary element of that dreary world in which Roland Lansdell was not. He was very good to her, and she was vaguely sensible of his goodness, and thankful to him. But his image had no abiding place in her thoughts. At stated times he came home and ate his dinner, or drank his tea, with substantial accompaniment of bread and butter and crisp garden-stuff; but, during the last two months, there had been many times when his wife was scarcely conscious of his presence. She was happy in fairyland, with the prince of her perpetual fairy tale, while poor George Gilbert munched bread and butter, and crunched overgrown radishes. But the fairy tale was finished now, with an abrupt and cruel cli-

max; the prince had vanished; the dream was over. Sitting by that open window, with her folded arms resting on the dusty sill, Mrs. Gilbert wondered how she was to endure her life.

And then her thoughts went back to the still pool below the mill-stream. She remembered the happy, drowsy summer afternoon on which Roland Lansdell had stood by her side and told her the depth of the stream. She closed her eyes, and her head sank forward upon her folded arms, and all the picture came back to her. She heard the shivering of the rushes, the bubbling splash of a gudgeon leaping out of the water: she saw the yellow sunlight on the leaves, the beautiful sunlight creeping in through every break in the dense foliage; and she saw his face turned towards her with that luminous look, that bright and tender smile, which had only seemed another kind of sunshine.

Would *he* be sorry if he opened the newspaper and read a little paragraph in a corner to the effect that she had been found floating amongst the long rushes in that very spot?

Would he remember the sunny afternoon, and the things he had said to her? His talk had been very dreamy and indefinite; but there had been, or had seemed to be, an undercurrent of mournful tenderness in all he said, as vague and fitful, as faint and mysterious, as the murmuring of the summer-wind among the rushes.

I think the youthful mind hankers naturally after suicide. Does not the youthful mind pine wildly for distinction, distinction at any price, even the temporary notoriety appertaining to a coroner's inquest and a paragraph in the Sunday papers? It was not so much the blank quiet of the grave for which Isabel languished; she wanted to die in order that Roland Lansdell might be sorry. To inspire one pang of remorse in that hard heart, she would have freely given her life. But when a sentimental young lady of nineteen is half inclined to make herself briefly famous by the crime of self-murder, she is apt to be deterred not so much by any pious horror of the crime, as by a difficulty in getting to the water.

"I cannot be allowed even to die!" thought

the Doctor's Wife, as she heard the steady tramp of her husband's footsteps in the lane, and knew that he would come in presently, and the doors would be locked, and all chance of death by drowning would be over for that night at least. There was laudanum in the surgery; Mrs. Gilbert knew the bottle in which it was kept: but she had taken laudanum for the toothache once or twice, and had found that opiate very nauseous. And death by poison was only a matter-of-fact business as compared to the still water and the rushes, and would have a very inferior effect in the newspapers.

The two young men came in presently, smelling of dust and tobacco-smoke. They found Isabel lying on the sofa, with her face turned to the wall. Did her head still ache? Yes, as badly as ever.

George sat down to read his Sunday paper. He was very fond of a Sunday paper; and he read all the accidents and police-reports, and the indignant letters from liberal-minded citizens, who signed themselves Aristides, and Diogenes,

and Junius Brutus, and made fiery protests against the iniquities of a bloated aristocracy. While the surgeon folded the crackling newspaper and cut the leaves, he told Isabel about Roland Lansdell's cheque.

"He has sent me five-and-twenty pounds," he said. "It's very liberal; but of course I can't think of taking such a sum. I've been a good deal about amongst his farm-people,—for there's been so much low fever this last month,—but I've been looking over the account I'd made out against him, and it doesn't come to a five-pound note. I suppose he's been used to deal with physicians, who charge a guinea for every visit. I shall send him back his cheque."

Isabel shuddered as she listened to her husband's talk. How low and mean all this discussion about money seemed! Had not the enclosure of the cheque in that cruel letter been almost an insult? What was her husband better than a tradesman, when there could be this question of accounts and payment between him and Roland Lansdell?

And then she thought of Clotilde and the Duchess,—the Duchess with the glittering hair and the cruel azure eyes. She thought of "marble pillars gleaming white against the purple of the night;" of "crimson curtains starred with gold, and high-bred beauty brightly cold." She thought of all that confusion of colour and glitter and perfume and music which was the staple commodity in Mr. Lansdell's poetic wares; and she wondered, in self-abasement and humiliation, how she could have ever for a moment deluded herself with the idea that he could feel one transient sentiment of regard or admiration for such a degraded being as herself. She thought of her scanty dresses, that never had the proper number of breadths in the skirt; she thought of her skimpy sleeves made in last year's fashion, her sunburnt straw-hat, her green parasol faded like sickly grass at the close of a hot summer. She thought of the gulf between herself and Edith Dombey, and wondered at her madness and presumption.

Ah, what a sweet dream it had been, and how

sad was the waking! During that happy dream she had forgotten all about Edith Dombey; she had ceased to languish for ruby-velvet gowns, and diamond tiaras, and splendid apartments; she had been transformed for the time from a silly sentimental girl into a woman; simple and confiding; blindly forgetful of all things in the world except her love. But now all the old feverish longing for splendour and beauty came back upon her. If she had been like Edith Dombey, he could never have treated her thus. But she was only a poor pale-faced little Florence, created to look pretty and to be snubbed.

Poor George Gilbert was quite puzzled by his wife's headache, which was of a peculiarly obstinate nature, lasting for some days. He gave her cooling draughts, and lotions for her forehead, which was very hot under his calm professional hand. Her pulse was rapid, her tongue was white, and the surgeon pronounced her to be bilious. He had not the faintest suspicion of any mental ailment lurking at the root of these

physical derangements. He was very simple-minded, and, being incapable of wrong himself, measured all his decent fellow-creatures by a fixed standard. He thought that the good and the wicked formed two separate classes as widely apart as the angels of heaven and the demons of the fiery depths. He knew that there were, somewhere or other in the universe, wives who wronged their husbands and went into outer darkness, just as he knew that in dismal dens of crime there lurked robbers and murderers, forgers and pickpockets, the newspaper record of whose evil deeds made no unpleasant reading for quiet Sunday afternoons. But of vague sentimental errors, of shadowy dangers and temptations, he had no conception. He had seen his wife pleased and happy in Roland Lansdell's society; and the thought that any wrong to himself, how small soever, could arise out of that companionship had never entered his mind. Mr. Raymond had remarked of the young surgeon that a man with such a moral region was born to be imposed upon.

The rest of the week passed in a strange dreary way for Isabel. The weather was very fine, cruelly fine; and to Mrs. Gilbert the universe seemed all dust and sunshine and blankness. Sigismund was very kind to her, and did his best to amuse her, reciting the plots of numerous embryo novels, which were to take Camden Town by storm in the future. But she sat looking at him without seeing him, and his talk sounded a harsh confusion on her ear. Oh, for the sound of that other voice,—that other voice, which had attuned itself to such a tender melody! Oh, for the beautiful cynical talk about the hollowness of life, and the wretchedness of things in general! Poor simple-hearted Mr. Smith made himself positively hateful to Isabel during that dismal week by reason of his efforts to amuse her.

"If he would only let me alone!" she thought. "If people would only have mercy upon me and let me alone!"

But that was just what every one seemed determined not to do. Sigismund devoted himself exclusively to the society of his young hos-

tess. William Jeffson let the weeds grow high amongst the potatoes while he planted standard rose-bushes, and nailed up graceful creepers, and dug, and improved, and transplanted in that portion of the garden which made a faint pretence to prettiness. Was it that he wished to occupy Mrs. Gilbert's mind, and to force her to some slight exertion? He did not prune a shrub, or trim a scrap of box, without consulting the Doctor's Wife upon the subject; and Isabel was called out into the garden half-a-dozen times in an hour.

And then during his visit Sigismund insisted upon taking Mrs. Gilbert to Warncliffe to dine with his mother and sisters. Mr. Smith's family made quite a festival for the occasion: there was a goose for dinner,—a vulgar and savoury bird; and a big damson-pie, and apples and pears in green leaf-shaped dishes for dessert; and of course Isabel's thoughts wandered away from that homely mahogany, with its crimson worsted d'oyleys and dark-blue finger-glasses, to the oval table at Mordred and all its artistic splendour of glass and fruit and flowers.

The Smith family thought Mrs. Gilbert very quiet and insipid; but luckily Sigismund had a great deal to say about his own achievements, past, present, and future; so Isabel was free to sit in the twilight listening dreamily to the slow footsteps in the old-fashioned street outside—the postman's knock, growing fainter and fainter in the distance—and the cawing of the rooks in a grove of elms on the outskirts of the town.

Mr. Smith senior spent the evening in the bosom of his family, and was put through rather a sharp examination upon abstruse questions in chancery and criminal practice by his aspiring son, who was always getting into morasses of legal difficulty, from which he required to be extricated by professional assistance.

The evening seemed a very long one to poor Isabel; but it was over at last, and Sigismund conducted her back to Graybridge in a jolting omnibus; and during that slow homeward drive she was free to sit in a corner and think of *him*.

Mr. Smith left his friends on the following day; and before going, he walked with Isabel

in the garden, and talked to her a little of her life.

"I daresay it *is* a little dull at Graybridge," he said, as if in answer to some remark of Isabel's, and yet she had said nothing. "I daresay you do find it a little dull, though George is one of the best fellows that ever lived, and devoted to you; yes, Izzie, devoted to you, in his quiet way. He isn't one of your demonstrative fellows, you know; can't go into grand romantic raptures, or any thing of that kind. But we were boys together, Izzie, and I know him thoroughly; and I know that he loves you dearly, and would break his honest heart if any thing happened to you; or he was—anyhow to take it into his head that you didn't love him. But still I daresay you do find life rather slow work down here; and I can't help thinking that if you were to occupy yourself a little more than you do, you'd be happier. Suppose now," cried Mr. Smith, palpably swelling with the importance of his idea,—"suppose you were to WRITE A NOVEL! THERE! You don't know how happy it would make you. Look at

me. I always used to be sighing and lamenting, and wishing for this, that, or the other; wishing I had ten thousand a year, or a Grecian nose, or some worldly advantage of that sort; but since I've taken to writing novels, I don't think I've a desire unsatisfied. There's nothing I haven't done—on paper. The beautiful women I've loved and married; the fortunes I've come into, always unexpectedly, and when I was at the lowest ebb, with a tendency to throw myself into the Serpentine in the moonlight; the awful vengeance I've wreaked upon my enemies; the murders I've committed would make the life of a Napoleon Buonaparte seem tame and trivial by comparison. I suppose it isn't I that steal up the creaking stair, with a long knife tightly grasped and gleaming blue in the moonbeams that creep through a chink in the shutter; but I'm sure I enjoy myself as much as if it was. And if I were a young lady," continued Mr. Smith, speaking with some slight hesitation, and glancing furtively at Isabel's face,—"if I were a young lady, and—and had a kind of romantic fancy for a

person I ought not to care about, I'll tell you what I'd do with him,—I'd put him into a novel, Izzie, and work him out in three volumes; and if I wasn't heartily sick of him by the time I got to the last chapter, nothing on earth would cure me."

This was the advice which Sigismund gave to Isabel at parting. She understood his meaning, and resented his interference. She was beginning to feel that people guessed at her wickedness, and tried to cure her of her madness. Yes; she was very wicked—very mad. She acknowledged her sin, but she could not put it away from her. And now that he was gone, now that he was far away, never to come back, never to look upon her face again, surely there could be no harm in thinking of him. She did think of him, daily and hourly; no longer with any reservation, no longer with any attempt at self-deception. Eugene Aram and Ernest Maltravers, the Giaour and the Corsair, were alike forgotten. The real hero of her life had come, and she bowed down before his image, and paid him perpetual worship. What did it matter? He was gone! He was as far

away from her life now as those fascinating figments of the poetic brain, Messrs. Aram and Maltravers. He was a dream, like all the other dreams of her life; only he could never melt away or change as they had done.

CHAPTER IX.

"ONCE MORE THE GATE BEHIND ME FALLS."

ALL through the autumnal months, all through the dreary winter, George Gilbert's wife endured her existence, and hated it. The days were all alike, all "dark and cold and dreary;" and her life was "dark and cold and dreary" like the days. She did not write a novel. She did not accomplish any task, or carry out any intention; but she began a great many undertakings, and grew tired of them, and gave them up in despair. She wrote a few chapters of a novel; a wild weird work of fiction, in which Mr. Roland Lansdell reigned paramount over all the rules of Lindley Murray, and was always nominative when he ought to have been objective, and *vice versâ*, and did altogether small credit to the university at which he was described to have gained an impos-

sible conglomeration of honours. Mrs. Gilbert very soon grew tired of the novel, though it was pleasant to imagine it in a complete form taking the town by storm. *He* would read it, and would know that she had written it. Was there not a minute description of Lord Thurston's oak in the very first chapter? It was pleasant to think of the romance, neatly bound in three volumes. But Mrs. Gilbert never got beyond a few random chapters, in which the grand crises of the work—the first meeting of the hero and heroine, the death of the latter by drowning and of the former by rupture of a blood-vessel, and so on—were described. She could not do the everyday work; she could erect a fairy-palace, and scatter lavish splendour in its spacious halls; but she could not lay down the stair-carpets, or fit the window-blinds, or arrange the planned furniture. She tore up her manuscript; and then for a little time she thought that she would be very good; kind to the poor, affectionate to her husband, and attentive to the morning and afternoon sermons at Graybridge church. She made a little book out

of letter-paper, and took notes of the vicar's and the curate's discourses; but both those gentlemen had a fancy for discussing abstruse points of doctrine far beyond Mrs. Gilbert's comprehension, and the Doctor's Wife found the business of a reporter very difficult work. She made her poor little unaided effort to repent of her sins, and to do good. She cut up her shabbiest dresses and made them into frocks for some poor children, and she procured a packet of limp tracts from a Conventford bookseller, and distributed them with the frocks; having a vague idea that no charitable benefaction was complete unless accompanied by a tract.

Alas for this poor sentimental child! the effort to be good, and pious, and practical did not sit well upon her. She got on very well with some of the cottagers' daughters, who had been educated at the national school, and were as fond of reading novels as herself; she fraternised with these damsels, and lent them odd volumes out of her little library, and even read aloud to them on occasion; and the vicar of Graybridge, entering

one day a cottage where she was sitting, was pleased to hear a humming noise, as of the human voice, and praised Mrs. Gilbert for her devotion to the good cause. He might not have been quite so well pleased had he heard the subject of her lecture, which had relation to a gentleman of loose principles and buccaneering propensities, a gentleman who

> "left a Corsair's name to other times,
> Link'd with one virtue and a thousand crimes."

But even these feeble attempts to be good—ah! how short a time it seemed since Isabel Gilbert had been a child, subject to have her ears boxed by the second Mrs. Sleaford! how short a time since to "be good" meant to be willing to wash the tea-cups and saucers, or to darn a three-cornered rent in a hobbledehoy's jacket!—even these feeble efforts ceased by and by, and Mrs. Gilbert abandoned herself to the dull monotony of her life, and solaced herself with the thought of Roland Lansdell as an opium-eater beguiles his listless days with the splendid visions that glorify his besotted stupor. She resigned herself to her

life, and was very obedient to her husband, and read novels as long as she could get one to read, and was for ever thinking of what might have been—if she had been free, and if Roland Lansdell had loved her. Alas, he had only too plainly proved that he did not love her, and had never loved her. He had made this manifest by cruelly indisputable evidence at the very time when she was beginning to be unutterably happy in the thought that she was somehow or other nearer and dearer to him than she ought to have been.

The dull autumn days and the dark winter days dragged themselves out, and Mr. Gilbert came in and went out, and attended to his duties, and ate his dinner, and rode Brown Molly between the leafless hedgerows, beside the frozen streams, as contentedly as he had done in the bright summer time, when his rides had lain through a perpetual garden. His was one of those happy natures which are undisturbed by any wild yearnings after the unattainable. He had an idea of exchanging his Graybridge practice for a better one by and by, and he used to talk to Isabel of

this ambitious design; but she took little interest in the subject. She had evinced very little interest in it from the first, and she displayed less now. What would be the use of such a change? It could only bring her a new kind of dreariness; and it was something to stand shivering on the little bridge under Lord Thurston's oak, so bare and leafless now; it was something to see even the chimney-pots of Mordred, the wonderful clusters of dark red-brick chimneys, warm against the chill December sky.

Mrs. Gilbert did not forget that passage in Roland Lansdell's letter, in which he had placed the Mordred library at her disposal. But she was very slow to avail herself of the privilege thus offered to her. She shrank away shyly from the thought of entering *his* house, even though there was no chance of meeting him in the beautiful rooms; even though he was at the other end of Europe, gay and happy, and forgetful of her. It was only by and by, when Mr. Lansdell had been gone some months, and when the dulness of her life had grown day by

day more oppressive, that Isabel Gilbert took courage to enter the noble gates of Mordred. Of course she told her husband whither she was going — was it not her duty so to do? — and George good-naturedly approving—"though I'm sure you've got books enough already," he said; "for you seem to be reading all day"—she set out upon a wintry afternoon, and walked alone to the Priory. The old housekeeper received her very cordially.

"I've been expecting to see you every day, ma'am, since Mr. Lansdell left us," the worthy woman exclaimed: "for he said as you were rare and fond of books, and was to take away any that you fancied; and John's to carry them for you, ma'am; and I was to pay you every attention. But I was beginning to think you didn't mean to come at all, ma'am."

There were fires in many of the rooms, for Mr. Lansdell's servants had a wholesome terror of that fatal blue mould which damp engenders upon the surface of a picture. The firelight glimmered upon golden frames, and glowed here

and there in the ruby depths of rich Bohemian glass, and flashed in fitful gleams upon rare porcelain vases and groups of stainless marble; but the rooms had a desolate look, somehow, in spite of the warmth and light and splendour.

Mrs. Warman, the housekeeper, told Isabel of Mr. Lansdell's whereabouts. He was at Milan, Lady Gwendoline Pomphrey had been good enough to tell Mrs. Warman; somewheres in Italy that was, the housekeeper believed; and he was to spend the rest of the winter in Rome, and then he was going on to Constantinople, and goodness knows where! For there never was such a traveller, or any one so restless-like.

"Isn't it a pity he don't marry his cousin Lady Gwendoline, and settle down like his pa?" said Mrs. Warman. "It do seem a shame for such a place as this to be shut up from year's end to year's end, till the very pictures get quite a ghastly way with them, and seem to stare at one reproachful-like, as if they was asking, over and over again, 'Where is he? Why don't he come home?'"

Isabel was standing with her back to the chill winter sky outside the window, and the housekeeper did not perceive the effect of her discourse. That simple talk was very painful to Mrs. Gilbert. It seemed to her as if Roland Lansdell's image receded farther and farther from her in this grand place, where all the attributes of his wealth and station were a standing evidence of the great gulf between them.

"What am I to him?" she thought. "What can such a despicable wretch as I am ever be to him? If he comes home, it will be to marry Lady Gwendoline. Perhaps he will tell her how he used to meet me by the mill-stream, and they will laugh together about me."

The hot blood surged up to her face as she thought of that brief summer-time, that one glorious glimpse of happiness, that one bright peep into paradise, which had only served to render the dull earth uglier and duller than it had been before.

Had her conduct been shameless and unwomanly, and would he remember her only to

despise her? She hoped that if Roland Lansdell ever returned to Midlandshire, it would be to find her dead. He could not despise her if she was dead. The only pleasant thought she had that afternoon was the fancy that Mr. Lansdell might come back to Mordred, and engage himself to his cousin, and the marriage would take place at Graybridge church; and as he was leading his bride along the quiet avenue, he would start back, anguish-stricken, at the sight of a newly-erected headstone—"To the memory of Isabel Gilbert, aged 20." 20! that seemed quite old, Mrs. Gilbert thought. She had always fancied that the next best thing to marrying a duke would be to fade into an early grave before the age of eighteen.

The first visit to Mordred made the Doctor's Wife very unhappy. Was it not a reopening of all the old wounds? Did it not bring too vividly back to her the happy summer-day when *he* had sat beside her at luncheon, and bent his handsome head and subdued his deep voice as he talked to her?

Having broken the ice, however, she went very often to the Priory; and on one or two occasions even condescended to take an early cup of tea with Mrs. Warman the housekeeper, though she felt that by so doing she in some small measure widened the gulf between Mr. Lansdell and herself. Little by little she grew to feel quite at home in the splendid rooms. It was very pleasant to sit in a low easy-chair in the library, — *his* easy-chair, — with a pile of books on the little reading-table by her side, and the glow of the great fire subdued by a noble screen of ground-glass and brazen scroll-work. Mrs. Gilbert was honestly fond of reading, and in the library at Mordred her life seemed less bitter than elsewhere. She read a great deal of the lighter literature upon Mr. Lansdell's bookshelves,—poems and popular histories, biographies and autobiographies, letters, and travels in bright romantic lands. To read of the countries through which Mr. Lansdell wandered seemed almost like following him.

As Mrs. Gilbert grew more and more familiar

with the grand old mansion, and more and more friendly with Mrs. Warman the housekeeper, she took to wandering in and out of all the rooms at pleasure, sometimes pausing before one picture, sometimes sitting before another for half-an-hour at a time lost in reverie. She knew all the pictures, and had learned their histories from Mrs. Warman, and ascertained which of them were most valued by Mr. Lansdell. She took some of the noble folios from the lower shelves of the library, and read the lives of her favourite painters, and stiff translations of Italian disquisitions on art. Her mind expanded amongst all the beautiful things around her, and the graver thoughts engendered out of grave books pushed away many of her most childish fancies, her simple sentimental yearnings. Until now she had lived too entirely amongst poets and romancers; but now grave volumes of biography opened to her a new picture of life. She read the stories of real men and women, who had lived and suffered real sorrows, prosaic anguish, hard commonplace trial and misery. Do you remember how, when young

Caxton's heart has been wrung by youth's bitterest sorrows, the father sends his son to the *Life of Robert Hall* for comfort? Isabel, very foolish and blind as compared with the son of Austin Caxton, was yet able to take some comfort from the stories of good men's sorrows. The consciousness of her ignorance increased as she became less ignorant; and there were times when this romantic girl was almost sensible, and became resigned to the fact that Roland Lansdell could have no part in the story of her life. It is impossible to live in the constant companionship of great writers without growing wiser and better in their grave and genial company. Slow and subtle is the influence that is exercised, unconscious the improvement that is wrought; but not the less certain. Isabel Gilbert went home from Mordred by and by with a cheerful countenance, and greeted her husband pleasantly, and was tolerably reconciled to a life whose dull monotony was in some manner counterbalanced by the leisure that left her free to read delightful books. If the drowsy life, the quiet afternoons

in the deserted chambers of the Priory, could have gone smoothly on for ever, I firmly believe that Isabel Gilbert would have, little by little, developed into a clever and sensible woman; but the current of her existence was not to glide with one dull motion to the end. There were to be storms and peril of shipwreck, and fear and anguish, before the waters flowed into a quiet haven, and the story of her life was ended.

One day in March, one bleak day, when the big fires in the rooms at Mordred seemed especially comfortable, Mrs. Gilbert carried her books into an inner apartment, half boudoir, half drawing-room, at the end of a long suite of splendid chambers. She took off her bonnet and shawl, and smoothed her dark hair before the glass. She had altered a little since the autumn, and the face that looked out at her to-day was thinner and older than that passionate tear-blotted face which she had seen in the glass on the night of Roland Lansdell's departure. Her sorrow had not been the less real because it was weak and childish, and had told considerably upon her ap-

pearance. But she was getting over it. She was almost sorry to think that it was so. She was almost grieved to find that her grief was less keen than it had been six months ago, and that the splendour of Roland Lansdell's image was perhaps a trifle faded.

But to-day Mrs. Warman was destined to undo the good work so newly effected by grave books, and to awaken all Isabel's regrets for the missing squire of Mordred. The worthy housekeeper had received a letter from her master, which she brought in triumph to Mrs. Gilbert. It was a very brief epistle, enclosing cheques for divers payments, and giving a few directions about the gardens and stables. "See that pines and grapes are sent to Lord Ruysdale's, whenever he likes to have them; and I shall be glad if you send hothouse fruit and flowers occasionally Mr. Gilbert, the surgeon of Graybridge. He was very kind to some of my people. Be sure that every attention is shown to Mrs. Gilbert whenever she comes to Mordred."

Isabel's eyes grew dim as she read this part

of the letter. He thought of her far away—at the other end of the world almost, as it seemed to her, for his letter was dated from Corfu; he remembered her existence, and was anxious for her happiness! The books were no use to her that day. She sat, with a volume open in her lap, staring at the fire, and thinking of *him*. She went back into the old italics again. His image shone out upon her in all its ancient splendour. Oh, dreary, dreary life where he was not! How was she to endure her existence? She clasped her hands in a wild rapture. "Oh, my darling, if you could know how I love you!" she whispered, and then started, confused and blushing. Never until that moment had she dared to put her passion into words. The Priory clocks struck three succeeding hours, but Mrs. Gilbert sat in the same attitude, thinking of Roland Lansdell. The thought of going home and facing her daily life again was unutterably painful to her. That fatal letter—so commonplace to a common reader—had revived all the old exaltation of feeling. Once more Isabel Gilbert floated away upon the

wings of sentiment and fancy, into that unreal region where the young squire of Mordred reigned supreme, beautiful as a prince in a fairy tale, grand as a demigod in some classic legend.

The French clock on the mantelpiece chimed the half hour after four, and Mrs. Gilbert looked up, aroused for a moment from her reverie.

"Half-past four," she thought; "it will be dark at six, and I have a long walk home."

Home! she shuddered at the simple monosyllable which it is the special glory of our language to possess. The word is very beautiful, no doubt; especially so to a wealthy country magnate,—happy owner of a grand old English mansion, with fair lands and covers, home-farm and model-farm buildings, shadowy park and sunlit pleasaunce, and wonderful dairies lined with majolica ware, and musical with the plashing of a fountain.

But for Mrs. Gilbert 'home' meant a square-built house in a dusty lane, and was never to mean any thing better or brighter. She got up from her low seat, and breathed a long-drawn

sigh as she took her bonnet and shawl from a table near her, and began to put them on before the glass.

"The parlour at home always looks ugliest and barest and shabbiest when I have been here," she thought, as she turned away from the glass and moved towards the door.

She paused suddenly. The door of the boudoir was ajar: all the other doors in the long range of rooms were open, and she heard a footstep coming rapidly towards her: a man's footstep! Was it one of the servant's? No; no servant's foot ever touched the ground with that firm and stately tread. It was a stranger's footstep, of course. Who should come there that day except a stranger? *He* was far away—at the other end of the world almost. It was not within the limits of possibility that *his* footfall should sound on the floors of Mordred Priory.

And yet! and yet! Isabel stopped, with her heart beating violently, her hands clasped, her lips apart and tremulous. And in the next moment the step was close to the threshold, the

door was pushed open, and she was face to face with Roland Lansdell; Roland Lansdell, whom she never thought to see again upon this earth! Roland Lansdell, whose face had looked at her in her dreams by day and night any time within these last six months!

"Isabel—Mrs. Gilbert!" he said, holding out both his hands, and taking hers, which were as cold as death.

She tried to speak, but no sound came from her tremulous lips. She could utter no word of welcome to this restless wanderer, but stood before him breathless and trembling. Mr. Lansdell drew a chair towards her, and made her sit down.

"I startled you," he said; "you did not expect to see me. I had no right to come to you so suddenly; but they told me you were here, and I wanted so much to see you,—I wanted so much to speak to you."

The words were insignificant enough, but there was a warmth and earnestness in the tones that was new to Isabel. Faint blushes flickered into her

cheeks, so deathly pale a few moments before; her eyelids fell over the dark unfathomable eyes; a look of sudden happiness spread itself upon her face and made it luminous.

"I thought you were at Corfu," she said. "I thought you would never, never, never come back again."

"I have been at Corfu, and in Italy, and in innumerable places. I meant to stay away; but —but I changed my mind, and I came back. I hope you are glad to see me again?"

What could she say to him? Her terror of saying too much kept her silent; the beating of her heart sounded in her ears, and she was afraid that he too must hear that tell-tale sound. She dared not raise her eyes, and yet she knew that he was looking at her earnestly, scrutinisingly even.

"Tell me that you are glad to see me," he said. "Ah, if you knew why I went away—why I tried so hard to stay away—why I have come back after all — after all—so many resolutions made and broken — so many deliberations — so

much doubt and hesitation! Isabel! tell me you are glad to see me once more!"

She tried to speak, and faltered out a word or two, and broke down, and turned away from him. And then she looked round at him again with a sudden impulse, as innocently and childishly as Zuleika may have looked at Selim; forgetful for a moment of the square-built house in the dusty lane, of George Gilbert, and all the duties of her life.

"I have been so unhappy," she exclaimed; "I have been so miserable; and you will go away again by and by, and I shall never, never see you any more!"

Her voice broke, and she burst into tears; and then, remembering the surgeon all in a moment, she brushed them hastily away with her handkerchief.

"You frightened me so, Mr. Lansdell," she said; "and I'm very late, and I was just going home, and my husband will be waiting for me. He comes to meet me sometimes when he can spare time. Good-by."

She held out her hand, looking at Roland nervously as she did so. Did he despise her very much? she wondered. No doubt he had come home to marry Lady Gwendoline Pomphrey, and there would be a fine wedding in the bright May weather. There was just time to go into a consumption between March and May, Mrs. Gilbert thought; and her tombstone might be ready for the occasion, if the gods who bestow upon their special favourites the boon of early death would only be kind to her.

"Good-by, Mr. Lansdell," she repeated.

"Let me walk with you a little way. Ah, if you knew how I have travelled night and day; if you knew how I have languished for this hour, and for the sight of—"

For the sight of what? Roland Lansdell was looking down at the pale face of the Doctor's Wife as he uttered that unfinished sentence. But amongst all the wonders that ever made the story of a woman's life wonderful, it could never surely come to pass that a demigod would descend from the ethereal regions which were his common habi-

tation, on *her* account, Mrs. Gilbert thought. She went home in the chill March twilight; but not through the bleak and common atmosphere which other people breathed that afternoon; for Mr. Lansdell walked by her side, and, not encountering the surgeon, went all the way to Graybridge, and only left Mrs. Gilbert at the end of the dusty lane in which the doctor's red lamp already glimmered faintly in the dusk. Would the master of Mordred Priory have been stricken with any sense of shame if he had met George Gilbert? There was an air of decision in Roland Lansdell's manner which seemed like that of a man who acts upon a settled purpose, and has no thought of shame.

CHAPTER X.

"MY LOVE'S A NOBLE MADNESS."

Mr. Lansdell did not seem in a hurry to make any demonstration of his return to Mordred. He did not affect any secrecy, it is true; but he shut himself a good deal in his own rooms, and seldom went out except to walk in the direction of Lord Thurston's oak, whither Mrs. Gilbert also rambled in the chilly spring afternoons, and where Mr. Lansdell and the Doctor's Wife met each other very frequently: not quite by accident now; for, at parting, Roland would say, with supreme carelessness, "I suppose you will be walking this way to-morrow,—it is the only walk worth taking hereabouts,—and I'll bring you the other volume."

Lord Ruysdale and his daughter were still at Lowlands; but Mr. Lansdell did not betake him-

self thither to pay his respects to his uncle and cousin, as he should most certainly have done in common courtesy. He did not go near the gray old mansion where the Earl and his daughter vegetated in gloomy and economical state; but Lady Gwendoline heard from her maid that Mr. Lansdell had come home; and bitterly resented his neglect. She resented it still more bitterly by and by, when the maid, who was a little faded like her mistress, and perhaps a little spiteful into the bargain, let drop a scrap of news she had gleaned in the servants'-hall. Mr. Lansdell had been seen walking on the Graybridge road with Mrs. Gilbert, the doctor's wife; "and it wasn't the first time either; and people do say it looks odd when a gentleman like Mr. Lansdell is seen walking and talking oftentimes with such as her."

The maid saw her mistress's face turn pale in the glass. No matter what the rank or station or sex of poor Othello; he or she is never suffered to be at peace, or to be happy—knowing nothing. There is always "mine ancient," male

or female, as the case may be, to bring home the freshest information about the delinquent.

"I have no wish to hear the servants' gossip about my cousin's movements," Lady Gwendoline said, with supreme hauteur. "He is the master of his own actions, and free to go where he pleases and with whom he pleases."

"I'm sure I beg pardon, my lady, and meant no offence," the maid answered meekly.—"But she don't like it, for all that," the damsel thought, with an inward chuckle.

Roland Lansdell kept himself aloof from his kindred; but he was not suffered to go his own way unmolested. The road to perdition is not quite so smooth and flower-bestrewn a path as we are sometimes taught to believe. A merciful hand often flings stumbling-blocks and hindering brambles in our way. It is our own fault if we insist upon clambering over the rocky barriers, and scrambling through the briery hedges, in a mad eagerness to reach the goal. Roland had started upon the fatal descent, and was of course going at that rapid rate at which we al-

ways travel downhill; but the road was not all clear for him. Charles Raymond of Conventford was amongst the people who heard accidentally of the young man's return; and about a week after Roland's arrival, the kindly philosopher presented himself at the gates of the Priory, and was fortunate enough to find his kinsman at home. In spite of Mr. Lansdell's desire to be at his ease, there was some restraint in his manner as he greeted his old friend.

"I am very glad to see you, Raymond," he said. "I should have ridden over to Conventford in a day or two. I've come home, you see."

"Yes, and I am very sorry to see it. This is a breach of good faith, Roland."

"Of what faith? with whom?"

"With me," answered Mr. Raymond gravely. "You promised me that you would go away."

"I did; and I went away."

"And now you have come back again."

"Yes," replied Mr. Lansdell, folding his arms and looking full at his kinsman, with an ominous

smile upon his face,—"yes; the fact is a little too evident for the basis of an argument. I have come back."

Mr. Raymond was silent for a minute or so. The younger man stood with his back against the angle of the embayed window, and he never took his eyes from his friend's face. There was something like defiance in the expression of his face, and even in his attitude, as he stood with folded arms leaning against the wainscot.

"I hope, Roland, that since you have come home, it is because the reason which took you away from this place has ceased to exist. You come back because you are cured. I cannot imagine it to be otherwise, Roland; I cannot believe that you have broken faith with me."

"What if I have come home because I find my disease is past all cure! What if I have kept faith with you, and have tried to forget, and come back at last because I cannot!"

"Roland!"

"Ah! it is a foolish fever, is it not? very foolish, very contemptible to the solemn-faced

doctor who looks on and watches the wretched patient tossing and writhing, and listens to his delirious ravings. Have you ever seen a man in the agonies of *delirium tremens*, catching imaginary flies, and shrieking about imps and demons capering on his counterpane? What a pitiful disease it is!—only the effect of a few extra bottles of brandy: but you can't cure it. You may despise the sufferer; but you shrink back terror-stricken before the might of the disease. You've done your duty, doctor: you tried honestly to cure my fever, and I submitted honestly to your remedies: but you're only a quack, after all: and you pretended—what all charlatans pretend—to be able to cure the incurable."

"You have come back with the intention of remaining, then, Roland?"

"*C'est selon!* I have no present idea of remaining here very long."

"And in the mean time you allow people to see you walking on the Graybridge road and loitering about Thurston's Crag with Mrs. Gil-

bert. Do you know that already that unhappy girl's name is compromised? The Graybridge people are beginning to couple her name with yours."

Mr. Lansdell laughed aloud, but not with the pleasant laugh which was common to him.

"Did you ever look in a British atlas for Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne?" he asked. "There are some atlases which do not give the name of the place at all: in others you'll find a little black dot, with the word 'Graybridge' printed in very small letters. The *British Gazetteer* will tell you that Graybridge is interesting on account of its church, which &c. &c.; that an omnibus plies to and fro between the village and Warncliffe station; and that the nearest market-town is Wareham. In all the literature of the world, that's about all the student can learn of Graybridge. What an affliction it must be to a traveller in the Upper Pyrenees, or on the banks of the Amazon, to know that people at Graybridge mix his name sometimes with their tea-table gossip! What an enduring torture for a loiterer

in fair Grecian isles—an idle dreamer beside the blue depths of a Southern sea—to know that Graybridge disapproves of him!"

"I had better go away, Roland," Mr. Raymond said, looking at his kinsman with a sad reproachful gaze, and stretching out his hand to take up the hat and gloves he had thrown upon a chair near him; "I can do no good here."

"You cannot separate me from the woman I love," answered Roland boldly. "I am a scoundrel, I suppose; but I am not a hypocrite. I might tell you a lie, and send you away hoodwinked and happy. No, Raymond, I will not do that. If I am foolish and wicked, I have not sinned deliberately. I have striven against my folly and my wickedness. When you talked to me that night at Waverly, you only echoed the reproaches of my own conscience. I accepted your counsel, and ran away. My love for Isabel Gilbert was only a brief infatuation, I thought, which would wear itself out like other infatuations, with time and absence. I went away, fully resolved never to look upon her face again; and

then, and then only, I knew how truly and how dearly I loved her. I went from place to place; but I could no more fly from her image than from my own soul. In vain I argued with myself—as better men have done before my time—that this woman was in no way superior to other women. Day by day I took my lesson deeper to heart. I cannot talk of these things to you. There is a kind of profanation in such a discussion. I can only tell you that I came back to England with a rooted purpose in my mind. Do not thrust yourself upon me; you have done your duty, and may wash your hands of me with Christian-like self-satisfaction; you have nothing further to do in this *galère*."

"Oh, Roland, that you should ever come to talk to me like this! Have you no sense of truth or honour? not even the common instinct of a gentleman? Have you no feeling for that poor honest-hearted fellow who has judged you by his own simple standard, and has trusted you implicitly? have you no feeling for him, Roland?"

"Yes, I am very sorry for him; I am sorry

for the grand mistake of his life. But do you think he could ever be happy with that woman? I have seen them together, and know the meaning of that grand word 'union' as applied to them. All the width of the universe cannot divide them more entirely than they are divided now. They have not one single sentiment in common. Charles Raymond, I tell you I am not entirely a villain; I do still possess some lingering remnant of that common instinct of which you spoke just now. If I had seen Isabel Gilbert happy with a husband who loved her, and understood her, and was loved by her, I would have held myself aloof from her pure presence; I would have stifled every thought that was a wrong to that holy union. I am not base enough to steal the lamp which lights a good man's home. But if I find a man who has taken possession of a peerless jewel, as ignorant of its value, and as powerless to appreciate its beauty, as the soldier who drags a Raffaelle from the innermost shrine of some ransacked cathedral and makes a knapsack for himself out of the painted canvas; if I find a pig trampling pearls under his

ruthless feet,—am I to leave the gems for ever in his sty, in my punctilious dread that I may hurt the feelings of the animal by taking his unvalued treasure away from him?"

"Other men have argued as you argue to-day, Roland," answered Mr. Raymond. He was not at all angry. He had made human nature, and human folly and frailty, his special study for the last thirty years, and was as tender and pitiful of the diseases of the mind as a great physician is of the ailments of the body. Had he not dissected the mind, and discovered it to be subject to quite as many and as complicated disorders as those which beset the wonderful structure of flesh and blood and bone in which it has its mysterious lodgment? "Other men have reasoned as you reason, Roland; but they have not the less brought trouble and shame and anguish and remorse upon themselves and upon the victims of their sin. Did not Rousseau declare that the first man who enclosed a plot of ground and called it 'mine' was the enemy of the human race? You young philosophers of our modern

day twist the argument another way, and are ready to avow that the man who marries a pretty woman is the foe to all unmarried mankind. He should have held himself aloof, and waited till *the* man arrived upon the scene,—the man with poetic sympathies and sublime appreciation of womanly grace and beauty, and all manner of hazy attributes which are supposed to be acceptable to sentimental womanhood. Bah, Roland! all this is very well on toned paper, in a pretty little hotpressed volume published by Messrs. Moxon; but the universe was never organised for the special happiness of poets. There must be jog-trot existences, and commonplace contentment, and simple everyday households, in which husbands and wives love each other, and do their duty to each other in a plain prosaic manner. Life can't be all rapture and poetry. Ah, Roland, it has pleased you of late years to play the cynic. Let your cynicism save you now. Is it worth while to do a great wrong, to commit a terrible sin, for the sake of a pretty face and a pair of black eyes, for the gratification of a passing folly?"

"It is not a passing folly," returned Mr. Lansdell, fiercely. "I was willing to think that it was so last autumn, when I took your advice and went away from this place. I know better now. If there is depth and truth any where in the universe, there is depth and truth in my love for Isabel Gilbert. Do not talk to me, Raymond. The arguments which would have weight with other men, have no power with me. It is my fault or my misfortune that I cannot believe in the things in which other men believe. Above all, I cannot believe in formulas. I cannot believe that a few words shuffled over by a parson at Conventford last January twelvemonth can be strong enough to separate me for ever from the woman I love, and who loves me. Yes, she loves me, Raymond!" cried the young man, his face lighting up suddenly with a smile, which imparted a warmth to his dark complexion like the rich glow of a Murillo. "She loves me, my beautiful unvalued blossom, that I found blooming all alone and unnoticed in a desert—she loves me. If I had discovered coldness or indifference, coquetry

or pretence of any kind in her manner the other day when I came home, I would have gone back even then; I would have acknowledged my mistake, and would have gone away to suffer alone. My dear old Raymond, it is your duty, I know, to lecture me and argue with me; but I tell you again it is only wasted labour; I am past all that. Try to pity me, and sympathise with me, if you can. Solitude is not such a pleasant thing, and people do not go through the world alone without some sufficient reason for their loneliness. There must have been some sorrow in your life, dear old friend, some mistake, some disappointment. Remember that, and have pity upon me."

Mr. Raymond was silent for some minutes; he sat with his face shaded with his hand, and the hand was slightly tremulous.

"There was a sorrow in my life, Roland," he said by and by, "a deep and lasting one; and it is the memory of that sorrow which makes you so dear to me; but it was a sorrow in which shame had no part. I am proud to think that I suffered, and suffered silently. I think you can guess, Ro-

land, why you have always been, and always must be, as dear to me as my own son."

"I can," answered the young man, holding out his hand; "you loved my mother."

"I did, Roland, and stood aloof and saw her married to the man she loved. I held her in my arms and blessed her on her wedding-day in the church yonder; but never from that hour to this have I ceased to love and honour her. I have worshipped a shadow all my life; but her image was nearer and dearer to me than the living beauty of other women. I can sympathise with a wasted love, Roland; but I cannot sympathise with a love that seeks to degrade its object."

"Degrade her!" cried Roland; "degrade Isabel! There can be no degradation in such a love as mine. But, you see, we think differently, we see things from a different point of view. You look through the spectacles of Graybridge, and see an elopement, a scandal, a paragraph in the county papers. I recognise only the immortal right of two free souls, who know that they have been created for each other."

"Do you ever think of your mother, Roland? I remember how dearly she loved you, and how proud she was of the qualities that made you worthy to be her son. Do you ever think of her as a living presence, conscious of your sorrows, compassionate of your sins? I think, if you considered her thus, Roland, as I do,—she has never been dead to me; she is the ideal in my life, and lifts my life above its common level,—if you thought of her as I do, I don't think you could hold to the bad purpose that has brought you back to this place."

"If I believed what you believe," cried Mr. Lansdell, with sudden animation, "I should be a different man from what I am—a better man than you are, perhaps. I sometimes wonder at such as you, who believe in all the glories of unseen worlds, and yet are so eager and so worldly in all your doings upon this shabby commonplace earth. If *I* believed, I think I should be blinded and intoxicated by the splendour of my heritage; I would turn Trappist, and live in a dumb rapture from year's end to year's end. I would go and

hide myself amid the mountain-tops, high up amongst the eagles and the stars, and ponder upon my glory. But you see it is my misfortune not to believe in that beautiful fable. I must take my life as it is; and if, after ten foolish unprofitable years, Fate brings one little chance of supreme happiness in my way, who shall tell me to withhold my hand? who shall forbid me to grasp my treasure?"

Mr. Raymond was not a man to be easily put off. He stayed at Mordred for the remainder of the day and dined with his young cousin, and sat talking with him until late at night; but he went away at last with a sad countenance and a heavy heart. Roland's disease was past the cure of philosophy. What chance have Friar Lawrence and philosophy ever had against Miss Capulet's Grecian nose and dark Italian eyes, the balmy air of a warm Southern night, the low harmonious murmur of a girlish voice, the gleaming of a white arm on a moonlit balcony?

CHAPTER XI.

A LITTLE CLOUD.

Isabel was happy. He had returned; he had returned to her; never again to leave her! Had he not said something to that effect? He had returned, because he had found existence unendurable away from her presence. Mr. Lansdell had told the Doctor's Wife all this, not once, but twenty times; and she had listened, knowing that it was wicked to listen, and yet powerless to shut her ears against the sweet insidious words. She was beloved; for the first time in her life really, truly, sentimentally beloved, like the heroine of a novel. She was beloved; despite of her shabby dresses, her dowdy bonnets, her clumsy country-made boots. All at once, in a moment, she was elevated into a queen, crowned with woman's noblest diadem, the love of a poet. She was Bea-

trice, and Roland Lansdell was Dante; or she was Leonora, and he was Tasso; she did not particularly care which. Her ideas of the two poets and their loves were almost as vague as the showman's notion of the rival warriors of Waterloo. She was the shadowy love of the poet, the pensive impossible love, who never could be more to him than a perpetual dream.

This was how Isabel Gilbert thought of the master of Mordred, who met her so often now in the chill spring sunshine. There was a kind of wickedness in these stolen meetings no doubt, she thought; but her wickedness was no greater than that of the beautiful princess who smiled upon the Italian poet. In that serene region of romance, that mystic fairyland in which Isabel's fancies dwelt, sin, as the world comprehends it, had no place. There was no such loathsome image in that fair kingdom of fountains and flowers. It was very wrong to meet Mr. Lansdell; but I doubt if the happiness of those meetings would have had quite such an exquisite flavour to Isabel had that faint *soupçon* of wickedness been wanting.

Is there not a legend of an elegant Frenchwoman who cried out, "Oh, if it were only a sin to eat ices!" This one charm was needed to make even a strawberry-ice entirely delicious.

Did Mrs. Gilbert ever think that the road which seemed so pleasant, the blossoming pathway along which she wandered hand in hand with Roland Lansdell, was all downhill, and that there was a black and hideous goal hidden below in the farthermost valley? No; she was enraptured and intoxicated by her present happiness, blinded by the glory of her lover's face. She could not have been so guilty had she been less innocent, or let me rather say, less ignorant. It would all go on for ever and ever, she thought, this delicious sentimental happiness. The *blasé* man of the world would never tire of playing this charming part of lover-poet. Lord Thurston's oak would put forth its tender leaflets, and fade, and bloom again; and Roland would never grow weary of loitering beneath the dense umbrageous branches. It had been very difficult for her to realise the splendid fact of his love and devotion; but once believing,

she was ready to believe for ever. She remembered a sweet sentimental legend of the Rhineland: the story of a knight who, going away to the wars, was reported as dead: whereon his lady-love, despairing, entered a convent, and consecrated the sad remainder of her days to heaven. But by and by the knight, who had not been killed, returned, and finding that his promised bride was lost to him, devoted the remainder of *his* days to constancy and solitude; building for himself a hermitage upon a rock high above the convent where his fair and faithful Hildegonde spent her pure and pious days. And every morning with the earliest flush of light in the low Eastern sky, and all day long, and when the evening-star rose pale and silvery beneath the purpling heavens, the hermit of love sat at the door of his cell gazing upon the humble casement behind which it pleased him to fancy his pure mistress kneeling before her crucifix, sometimes mingling his name with her prayers. And was not the name of the knight Roland—*his* name? It was such a love as this which Isabel imagined

she had won for herself. It is such a love as this which is the dearest desire of womankind,—a beautiful, useless, romantic devotion,—a wasted life of fond regretful worship. Poor weak sentimental Mary of Scotland accepts Chastelar's poetic homage, and is pleased to think that the poet's heart is breaking because of her grace and loveliness, and would like it to go on breaking for ever. But the love-sick poet grows weary of that distant worship, and would scale the royal heavens to look nearer at the brightness of his star; whence come confusions and troubles, and the amputation of that foolish half-demented head.

So there was no thought of peril to herself or to others in Mrs. Gilbert's mind when she stood on the bridge above the mill-stream talking with Roland Lansdell. She had a vague idea that she was not exactly doing her duty to her husband; but poor George's image only receded farther and farther from her. Did she not still obey his behests, and sit opposite to him at the little dinner-table, and pour out his tea at breakfast, and assist him to put on his overcoat in the passage before

he went out? Could she do more for him than that? No; he had himself rejected all further attention. She had tried to brush his hat once in a sudden gush of dutiful feeling; but she had brushed the nap the wrong way, and had incurred her husband's displeasure. She had tried to read poetry to him, and he had yawned during her lecture. She had put flowers on his dressing-table —white fragile-looking flowers—in a tall slender vase, with a tendril of convolvulus twined artfully round the stem, like a garland about a classic column; and Mr. Gilbert had objected to the perfumed blossoms as liable to generate carbonic-acid gas. What could any one do for such a husband as this? The tender sentimental raptures, the poetic emotions, the dim aspirations, which Isabel revealed to Roland, would have been as unintelligible as the Semitic languages to George. Why should she not bestow this other half of her nature upon whom she chose? If she gave her duty and obedience to Othello, surely Cassio might have all the poetry of her soul, which the matter-of-fact Moor despised and rejected.

It was something after this wise that Isabel reasoned, when she did reason at all about her platonic attachment for Roland Lansdell. She was very happy, lulled to rest by her own ignorance of all danger, rather than by any deeply-studied design on the part of her lover. His manner to her was more tender than a father's manner to his favourite child,—more reverential than Raleigh's to Elizabeth of England,—but in all this he had no thought of deception. The settled purpose in his mind took a firmer root every day; and he fancied that Isabel understood him, and knew that the great crisis of her life was fast approaching, and had prepared herself to meet it.

One afternoon, late in the month, when the March winds were bleaker and more pitiless than usual, Isabel went across the meadows where the hedgerows were putting forth timid little buds to be nipped by the chill breezes, and where here and there a violet made a tiny speck of purple on the grassy bank. Mr. Lansdell was standing on the bridge when Isabel approached the familiar

trysting-place, and turned with a smile to greet her. But although he smiled as he pressed the slender little hand that almost always trembled in his own, the master of Mordred was not very cheerful this afternoon. It was the day succeeding that on which Charles Raymond had dined with him, and the influence of his kinsman's talk still hung about him and oppressed him. He could not deny that there had been truth and wisdom in his friend's earnest pleading; but he could not abandon his purpose now. Long vacillating and irresolute, long doubtful of himself and all the world, he was resolved at last, and obstinately bent upon carrying out his resolution.

"I am going to London, Isabel," he said, after standing by Mrs. Gilbert for some minutes, staring silently at the water: "I am going to London to-morrow morning, Isabel." He always called her Isabel now, and lingered with a kind of tenderness upon the name. Edith Dombey would have brought confusion upon him for this presumption, no doubt, by one bright glance of haughty reproof; but poor Isabel had found out

long ago that she in no way resembled Edith Dombey.

"Going to London!" cried the Doctor's Wife, piteously; "ah, I knew, I knew that you would go away again, and I shall never see you any more." She clasped her hands in her sudden terror, and looked at him with a world of sorrow and reproach in her pale face. "I knew that it would be so!" she repeated; "I dreamt the other night that you had gone away, and I came here; and, oh, it seemed such a dreadful way to come, and I kept taking the wrong turnings, and going through the wrong meadows; and when I came, there was only some one—some stranger, who told me that you were gone, and would never come back."

"But, Isabel—my love—my darling—" the tender epithets did not startle her; she was so absorbed by the fear of losing the god of her idolatry; "I am only going to town for a day or two to see my lawyer—to make arrangements—arrangements of vital importance;—I should be a scoundrel if I neglected them, or incurred

the smallest hazard by delaying them an hour. You don't understand these sort of things, Isabel; but trust me, and believe that your welfare is dearer to me than my own. I must go to town; but I shall only be gone a day or two—two days at the most—perhaps only one. And when I come back, Izzie, I shall have something to say to you—something very serious—something that had better be said at once—something that involves all the happiness of my future life. Will you meet me here two days hence,—on Wednesday, at three o'clock? You will, won't you, Isabel? I know I do wrong in exposing you to the degradation of these stolen meetings. If I feel the shame so keenly, how much worse it must be for you—my own dear girl—my sweet innocent darling! But this shall be the last time, Isabel,—the last time I will ask you to incur any humiliation for me. Henceforward we will hold our heads high, my love; for at least there shall be no trickery or falsehood in our lives."

Mrs. Gilbert stared at Roland Lansdell in utter bewilderment. He had spoken of shame and de-

gradation, and had spoken in the tone of a man who had suffered, and still suffered, very bitterly. This was all Isabel could gather from her lover's speech, and she opened her eyes in blank amazement as she listened to him. Why should he be ashamed, or humiliated, or degraded? Was Dante degraded by his love for Beatrice? was Waller degraded by his devotion to Sacharissa—for ever evidenced by so many charming versicles, and never dropping down from the rosy cloud-land of poetry into the matter-of-fact regions of prose? Degraded! ashamed!—her face grew crimson all in a moment as these cruel words stung her poor sentimental heart. She wanted to run away all at once, and never see Mr. Lansdell again. Her heart would break, as a matter of course; but how infinitely preferable to shame would be a broken heart and early death with an appropriate tombstone! The tears rolled down her flushed cheek, as she turned away her face from Roland. She was almost stifled by mingled grief and indignation.

"I did not think you were ashamed to meet

me here sometimes," she sobbed out; "you asked me to come. I did not think that you were humiliated by talking to me—I—"

"Why, Izzie—Isabel darling!" cried Roland, "can you misunderstand me so utterly? Ashamed to meet you—ashamed of your society! Can you doubt what would have happened had I come home a year earlier than it was my ill-fortune to come? Can you doubt for a moment that I would have chosen you for my wife out of all the women in the universe, and that my highest pride would have been the right to call you by that dear name? I was too late, Izzie, too late; too late to win that pure and perfect happiness which would have made a new man of me, which would have transformed me into a good and useful man, as I think. I suppose it is always so; I suppose there is always one drop wanting in the cup of joy, that one mystic drop which would change the commonplace potion into an elixir. I came too late! Why should I have every thing in this world? Why should I have fifteen thousand a-year, and Mordred Priory, and the right to ac-

knowledge the woman I love in the face of all creation, while there are crippled wretches sweeping crossings for the sake of a daily crust, and men and women wasting away in great prison-houses called Unions, whose first law is the severance of every earthly tie? I came too late, and I suppose it was natural that I should so come. Millions of destinies have been blighted by as small a chance as that which has blighted mine, I daresay. We must take our fate as we find it, Isabel; and if we are true to each other, I hope and believe that it may be a bright one even yet —even yet."

A woman of the world would have very quickly perceived that Mr. Lansdell's discourse must have relation to more serious projects than future meetings under Lord Thurston's oak, with interchange of divers volumes of light literature. But Isabel Gilbert was not a woman of the world. She had read novels while other people perused the Sunday papers; and of the world out of a three-volume romance she had no more idea than a baby. She believed in a phantasmal universe,

created out of the pages of poets and romancers; she knew that there were good people and bad people—Ernest Maltravers's and Lumley Ferrers's, Walter Gays and Carkers; but beyond this she had very little notion of mankind; and having once placed Mr. Lansdell amongst the heroes, could not imagine him to possess one attribute in common with the villains. If he seemed intensely in earnest about these meetings under the oak, she was in earnest too; and so had been the German knight, who devoted the greater part of his life to watching the casement of his lady-love.

"I shall see you sometimes," she said with timid hesitation,—"I shall see you sometimes, sha'n't I, when you come home from town? Not often, of course: I daresay it isn't right to come here often, away from George; and the last time I kept him waiting for his dinner; but I told him where I had been, and that I'd seen you, and he didn't mind a bit."

Roland Lansdell sighed.

"Ah, don't you understand, Isabel," he said, "that doubles our degradation? It is for the

very reason that he 'doesn't mind,' it is precisely because he is so simple-hearted and trusting, that we ought not to deceive the poor fellow any longer. *That's* the degradation, Izzie; the deception, not the deed itself. A man meets his enemy in fair fight and kills him, and nobody complains. The best man must always win, I suppose; and if he wins by fair means, no one need grudge him his victory. I mystify you, don't I, my darling, by all this rambling talk? I shall speak plainer on Wednesday. And now let me take you homewards," added Mr. Lansdell, looking at his watch, "if you are to be at home at five."

He knew the habits of the doctor's little household, and knew that five o'clock was Mr. Gilbert's dinner-hour. There was no conversation of any serious nature during the homeward walk—only dreamy talk about books and poets and foreign lands. Mr. Lansdell told Isabel of bright spots in Italy and Greece, wonderful villages upon the borders of blue lakes deeply hidden among Alpine slopes, and snow-clad peaks like stationary clouds

—beautiful and picturesque regions which she must see by and by, Roland added gaily.

But Mrs. Gilbert opened her eyes very wide and laughed aloud. How should she ever see such places? she asked, smiling. George would never go there: he would never be rich enough to go; nor would he care to go, were he ever so rich.

And while she was speaking, Isabel thought that, after all, she cared very little for those lovely lands; much as she had dreamed about them and pined to see them, long ago in the Camberwell garden, on still moonlight nights, when she used to stand on the little stone step leading from the kitchen, with her arms resting on the water-butt, like Juliet's on the balcony, and fancy it was Italy. Now she was quite resigned to the idea of never leaving Graybridge-on-the-Wayverne. She was content to live there all her life, so long as she could see Mr. Lansdell now and then: so long as she could know that he was near her, thinking of her and loving her, and that at any moment his dark face might shine out of the dul-

ness of her life. A perfect happiness had come to her—the happiness of being beloved by the bright object of her idolatry: nothing could add to that perfection: the cup was full to the very brim, filled with an inexhaustible draught of joy and delight.

Mr. Lansdell stopped to shake hands with Isabel when they came to the gate leading into the Graybridge road.

"Good-by," he said softly; "good-by, until Wednesday, Isabel. Isabel—what a pretty name it is! You have no other Christian name?"

"Oh, no."

"Only Isabel—Isabel Gilbert. Good-by."

He opened the gate, and stood watching the Doctor's Wife as she passed out of the meadow, and walked at a rapid pace towards the town. A man passed along the road as Mr. Lansdell stood there, and looked at him as he went by, and then turned and looked after Isabel.

"Raymond is right, then," thought Roland; "they have begun to stare and chatter already. My poor darling, henceforward it is my duty to

protect you from such as these. Graybridge, Graybridge!—the place looks like a gaol. How I long for the free atmosphere of Switzerland; the blue sky, the purple waters, the rainbow-tinted clouds, and shadowy mountain-tops! It is like climbing half-way to heaven to live there. And I am to stop at home in this narrow patch of English landscape, and chain myself down to suit the requirements of Graybridge. I am to be a prisoner for life, with Graybridge for my gaoler; and I am to see my darling's lovely face looking sadly at me from behind the prison-bars, growing paler every day, until it fades away for ever,—rather than outrage the feelings of Graybridge? Let them talk about me at their tea-tables, and paragraph me in their newspapers, to their heart's content! My soul is as much above them as the eagle soaring sunward is above the sheep that stare up at him from the valleys. I have set my foot upon the fiery ploughshare, but my darling shall be carried across it scatheless in the strong arms of her lover."

Mrs. Gilbert went home to her husband, and sat opposite to him at dinner as usual; but Roland's words, dimly as she had comprehended their meaning, had in some manner influenced her, for she blushed when George asked her where she had been that cold afternoon. Mr. Gilbert did not see the blush; for he was carving the joint as he asked the question, and indeed had asked it rather as a matter of form than otherwise. This time Mrs. Gilbert did not tell her husband that she had met Roland Lansdell. The words 'shame and degradation' were ringing in her ears all dinner-time. She had tasted, if ever so little, of the fruit of the famous tree, and she found the flavour thereof very bitter. It must be wrong to meet Roland under Lord Thurston's oak, since he said it was so; and the meeting on Wednesday was to be the last; and yet their fate was to be a happy one: had he not said so, in eloquently mysterious words, whose full meaning poor Isabel was quite unable to fathom? She brooded over what Mr. Lansdell said all that evening, and a dim sense of impending trouble crept into her

mind. He was going away for ever, perhaps; and had only told her otherwise in order to lull her to rest with vain hopes, and thus spare himself the trouble of her lamentations. Or he was going to London to arrange for a speedy marriage with Lady Gwendoline. Poor Isabel could not shake off her jealous fears of that brilliant high-bred rival, whom Mr. Lansdell had once loved. Yes; he had once loved Lady Gwendoline. Mr. Raymond had taken an opportunity of telling Isabel all about the young man's early engagement to his cousin; and he had added a hope that, after all, a marriage between the two might yet be brought about; and had not the housekeeper at Mordred said very much the same thing?

"He will marry Lady Gwendoline," Isabel thought, in a sudden access of despair; "and that is what he is going to tell me on Wednesday. He was different to-day from what he has been since he came back to Mordred. And yet—and yet—" And yet what? Isabel tried in vain to fathom the meaning of all Roland Lansdell's wild talk—now earnestly grave—now suddenly reckless—one

moment full of hope, and in the next tinctured with despair. What was this simple young novel-reader to make of a man of the world, who was eager to defy the world, and knew exactly what a terrible world it was that he was about to outrage and defy?

Mrs. Gilbert lay awake all that night, thinking of the meeting by the waterfall. Roland's talk had mystified and alarmed her. The ignorant happiness, the unreflecting delight in her lover's presence, the daily joy that in its fulness had no room for a thought of the morrow, had vanished all at once like a burst of sunlight eclipsed by the darkening clouds that presage a storm. Eve had listened to the first whispers of the serpent, and Paradise was no longer entirely beautiful.

CHAPTER XII.

LADY GWENDOLINE DOES HER DUTY.

Mrs. Gilbert stayed at home all through the day which succeeded her parting from Roland Lansdell. She stayed in the dingy parlour, and read a little, and played upon the piano a little, and sketched a few profile portraits of Mr. Lansdell, desperately inky and sentimental, with impossibly enormous eyes. She worked a little, wounding her fingers, and hopelessly entangling her thread; and she let the fire out two or three times, as she was accustomed to do very often, to the aggravation of Mrs. Jeffson. That hard-working and faithful retainer came into the parlour at two o'clock, carrying a little plate of seed-cake and a glass of water for her mistress's frugal luncheon; and finding the grate black and dismal for the second time that day, fetched a bundle of wood

and a box of matches, and knelt down to rekindle the cavernous cinders in no very pleasant humour.

"I'm sorry I've let the fire out again, Mrs. Jeffson," Isabel said meekly. "I think there must be something wrong in the grate somehow, for the fire always *will* go out."

"It usen't to go out in Master George's mother's time," Mrs. Jeffson answered, rather sharply; "and it was the same grate then. But my dear young mistress used to sit in yon chair, stitch, stitch, stitch at the Doctor's cambric shirt-fronts, and the fire was always burning bright and pleasant when he came home. She was a regular stay-at-home, she was," added the housekeeper, in a musing tone; "and it was very rare as she went out beyond the garden, except on a summer's evening, when the Doctor took her for a walk. She didn't like going out alone, poor dear; for there was plenty of young squires about Graybridge as would have been glad enough to follow her and talk to her, and set people's malicious tongues chattering about her, if she'd have let 'em. But she never did; she was as happy as the day

was long, sitting at home, working for her husband, and always ready to jump up and run to the door when she heard his step outside—God bless her innocent heart!"

Mrs. Gilbert's face grew crimson as she bent over a sheet of paper on which the words 'despair' and 'prayer,' 'breath' and 'death,' were twisted into a heartrending rhyme. Ah, this was a part of the shame and degradation of which Roland had spoken. Every body had a right to lecture her, and at every turn the perfections of the dead were cast reproachfully in her face. As if *she* did not wish to be dead and at rest, regretted and not lectured, deplored rather than slandered and upbraided. These vulgar people laid their rude hands upon her cup of joy, and changed its contents into the bitter waters of shame. These commonplace creatures set themselves up as the judges of her life, and turned all its purest and brightest poetry into a prosaic record of disgrace. The glory of the Koh-i-noor would have been tarnished by the print of such base hands as these. How could these people

read her heart, or understand her love for Roland Lansdell? Very likely the serene lady of the Rhineland, praying in her convent-cell, was slandered and misrepresented by vulgar boors, who, passing along the roadway beneath, saw the hermit-knight sitting at the door of his cell and gazing fondly at his lost love's casement.

Such thoughts as this arose in Isabel's mind, and she was angry and indignant at the good woman who presumed to lecture her. She pushed away the plate of stale cake, and went to the window flushed and resentful. But the flush faded all in a moment from her face when she saw a lady in a carriage driving slowly towards the gate,—a lady who wore a great deal of soft brown fur, and a violet-velvet bonnet with drooping feathers, and who looked up at the house as if uncertain as to its identity. The lady was Lord Ruysdale's daughter; and the carriage was only a low basket-phaeton, drawn by a stout bay cob, and attended by a groom in a neat livery of dark blue. But if the simple equipage had been the fairy-chariot of Queen Mab herself, Mrs. Gilbert

could scarcely have seemed more abashed and astounded by its apparition before her door. The groom descended from his seat at an order from his mistress, and rang the bell at the surgeon's gate; and then Lady Gwendoline, having recognised Isabel at the window, and saluted her with a very haughty inclination of the head, abandoned the reins to her attendant, and alighted.

Mrs. Jeffson had opened the gate by this time, and the visitor swept by her into the little passage, and thence into the parlour, where she found the Doctor's Wife standing by the table, trifling nervously with that scrap of fancy-work whose only progress was to get grimier and grimier day by day under Isabel's idle fingers.

Oh, what a dingy shabby place that Graybridge parlour was always! how doubly and trebly dingy it seemed to-day by contrast with that gorgeous Millais-like figure of Gwendoline Pomphrey, rich and glorious in violet velvet and Russian sable, with the yellow tints of her hair contrasted by the deep purple shadows under her bonnet. Mrs. Gilbert almost sank under the

weight of all that aristocratic splendour. She brought a chair for her visitor, and asked in a tremulous voice if Lady Gwendoline would be pleased to sit. There was a taint of snobbishness in her reverential awe of the Earl's handsome daughter. Was not Lady Gwendoline the very incarnation of all her own foolish dreams of the beautiful? Long ago, in the Camberwell garden, she had imagined such a creature; and now she bowed herself before the splendour, and was stricken with fear and trembling in the dazzling presence. And then there were other reasons that she should tremble and turn pale. Might not Lady Gwendoline have come to announce her intended marriage with Mr. Lansdell, and to smite the poor wretch before her with sudden madness and despair? Isabel felt that some calamity was coming down upon her: and she stood pale and silent, meekly waiting to receive her sentence.

"Pray sit down, Mrs. Gilbert," said Lady Gwendoline; "I wish to have a little conversation with you. I am very glad to have found you at home, and alone."

The lady spoke very kindly, but her kindness had a stately coldness that crept like melted ice through Isabel's veins, and chilled her to the bone.

"I am older than you, Mrs. Gilbert," said Lady Gwendoline, after a little pause, and she slightly winced as she made the confession; "I am older than you; and if I speak to you in a manner that you may have some right to resent as an impertinent interference with your affairs, I trust that you will believe I am influenced only by a sincere desire for your welfare."

Isabel's heart sank to a profounder depth of terror than before when she heard this. She had never in her life known any thing but unpleasantness to come from people's desire for her welfare: from the early days in which her stepmother had administered salutary boxes on the ear, and salts-and-senna, with an equal regard to her moral and physical improvement. She looked up fearfully at Lady Gwendoline, and saw that the fair Saxon face of her visitor was almost as pale as her own.

"I am older than you, Mrs. Gilbert," repeated Gwendoline, "and I know my cousin Roland

Lansdell much better than you can possibly know him."

The sound of the dear name, the sacred name, which to Isabel's mind should only have been spoken in a hushed whisper, like a tender pianissimo passage in music, shot home to the foolish girl's heart. Her face flushed crimson, and she clasped her hands together, while the tears welled slowly up to her eyes.

"I know my cousin better than you can know him; I know the world better than you can know it. There are some women, Mrs. Gilbert, who would condemn you unheard, and who would consider their lips sullied by any mention of your name. There are many women in my position who would hold themselves aloof from you, content to let you go your own way. But I take leave to think for myself in all matters. I have heard Mr. Raymond speak very kindly of you; I cannot judge you as harshly as other people judge you; I cannot believe you to be what your neighbours think you."

"Oh, what, what can they think me?" cried

Isabel, trembling with a vague fear, an ignorant fear of some deadly peril utterly unknown to her, and yet close upon her; "what harm have I done, that they should think ill of me? what can they say of me? what *can* they say?"

Her eyes were blinded by tears, that blotted Lady Gwendoline's stern face from her sight. She was still so much a child, that she made no effort to conceal her terror and confusion. She bared all the foolish secrets of her heart before those cruel eyes.

"People say that you are a false wife to a simple-hearted and trusting husband," Lord Ruysdale's daughter answered, with pitiless calmness; "a false wife in thought and intention, if not in deed; since you have lured my cousin back to this place; and are ready to leave it with him as his mistress whenever he chooses to say 'Come.' That is what people think of you; and you have given them only too much cause for their suspicion. Do you imagine that you could keep any secret from Graybridge? do you think your actions or even your thoughts could escape the dull eyes

of these country people, who have nothing better to do than watch the doings of their neighbours?" demanded Lady Gwendoline bitterly. Alas! she knew that her name had been bandied about from gossip to gossip; and that her grand disappointment in the matter of Lord Heatherland, her increasing years, and declining chances of a prize in the matrimonial lottery, had been freely discussed at all the tea-tables in the little country-town.

"Country people find out every thing, Mrs. Gilbert," she said presently. "You have been watched in your sentimental meetings and rambles with Mr. Lansdell; and you may consider yourself very fortunate if no officious person has taken the trouble to convey the information to your husband."

Isabel had been crying all this time, crying bitterly, with her head bent upon her clasped hands; but to Lady Gwendoline's surprise she lifted it now, and looked at her accuser with some show of indignation, if not defiance.

"I told George every—almost every time I

met Mr. Lansdell," she exclaimed; "and George knows that he lends me books; and he likes me to have books—nice, in-st-structive books," said Mrs. Gilbert, stifling her sobs as best she might; "and I n-never thought that any body could be so wicked as to fancy there was any harm in my meeting him. I don't suppose any one ever said any thing to Beatrice Portinari, though she was married, and Dante loved her very dearly; and I only want to see him now and then, and to hear him talk; and he has been very, very kind to me."

"Kind to you!" cried Lady Gwendoline, scornfully. "Do you know the value of such kindness as his? Did you ever hear of any good coming of it? Did such kindness ever bear any fruit but anguish and misery and mortification? You talk like a baby, Mrs. Gilbert, or else like a hypocrite. Do you know what my cousin's life has been? Do you know that he is an infidel, and outrages his friends by opinions which he does not even care to conceal? Do you know that his name has been involved with the names of married women before to-day? Are you besotted

enough to think that his new fancy for you is any thing more than the caprice of an idle and dissipated man of the world, who is ready to bring ruin upon the happiest home in England for the sake of a new sensation, a little extra aliment for the vanity which a host of foolish women have pampered into his ruling vice?"

"Vanity!" exclaimed Mrs. Gilbert; "oh, Lady Gwendoline, how can you say that *he* is vain? It is you who do not know him. Ah, if you could only know how good he is, how noble, how generous! I know that he would never try to injure me by so much as a word or a thought. Why should I not love him: as we love the stars, that are so beautiful and so distant from us? Why should I not worship him as Helena worshipped Bertram, as Viola loved Zanoni? The wicked Graybridge people may say what they like; and if they tell George any thing about me, I will tell him the truth; and then—and then—if I was only a Catholic, I would go into a convent like Hildegonde! Ah, Lady Gwendoline, you do not understand such love as mine!"

added Isabel, looking at the Earl's daughter with an air of superiority that was superb in its simplicity.

She was proud of her love, which was so high above the comprehension of ordinary people. It is just possible that she was even a little proud of the slander which attached to her. She had all her life been pining for the glory of martyrdom, and lo, it had come upon her. The fiery circlet had descended upon her brow; and she assumed a dignified *pose* in order to support it properly, and wondered if the insignia was becoming.

"I only understand that you are a very foolish person," Lady Gwendoline answered coldly; "and I have been extremely foolish to trouble myself about you. I considered it my duty to do what I have done, and I wash my hands henceforward of you and your affairs. Pray go your own way, and do not fear any further interference from me. It is quite impossible that I can have the smallest association with my cousin's mistress."

She hurled the cruel word at the Doctor's

Wife, and departed with a sound of silken rustling in the narrow passage. Isabel heard the carriage drive away, and then flung herself down upon her knees, to sob and lament her cruel destiny. That last word had stung her to the very heart. It took all the poetry out of her life: it brought before her, in its fullest significance, the sense of her position. If she met Roland under Lord Thurston's oak,—if she walked with him in the meadows, that his footsteps beautified into the smooth lawns of Paradise,—people, vulgar ignorant people, utterly unable to comprehend her or her love, would say that she was his mistress. His mistress! To what people she had heard that word applied! And Beatrice Portinari, and Viola, and Leila, and Gulnare, and Zelica, what of them? The visions of all those lovely and shining creatures arose before her; and beside them, in letters of fire, blazed the odious word that transformed her fond platonic worship, her sentimental girlish idolatry, into a shame and disgrace.

"I will see him to-morrow and say farewell

to him," she thought. "I will bid him good-by for ever and ever, though my heart should break, —ah, how I hope it may, as I say the bitter word!—and never, never will see him again. I know now what he meant by shame and humiliation; I can understand all he said now."

Mrs. Gilbert had another of her headaches that evening, and poor George was obliged to dine alone. He went upstairs once or twice in the course of the evening to see his wife, and found her lying very quietly in the dimly-lighted room with her face turned to the wall. She held out her hand to him as he bent over her, and pressed his broad palm with her feverish fingers.

"I'm afraid I've been neglectful of you sometimes, George," she said; "but I won't be so again. I won't go out for those long walks, and keep you waiting for dinner; and if you would like a set of new shirts made—you said the other day that yours were nearly worn out—I should like to make them for you myself. I used to help to make the shirts for my brothers,

and I don't think I should pucker so much now; and, oh, George, Mrs. Jeffson was talking of your poor mother to-day, and I want you to tell me what it was she died of."

Mr. Gilbert patted his wife's hand approvingly, and laid it gently down on the coverlet.

"That's a melancholy subject, my love," he said, "and I don't think it would do either of us any good to talk about it. As for the shirts, my dear, it's very good of you to offer to make them; but I doubt if you'd manage them as well as the workwoman at Wareham, who made the last. She's very reasonable; and she's lame, poor soul; so it's a kind of charity to employ her. Good-by for the present, Izzie; try to get a nap, and don't worry your poor head about any thing."

He went away, and Isabel listened to his substantial boots creaking down the stairs, and away towards the surgery. He had come thence to his wife's room, and he left a faint odour of drugs behind him. Ah, how that odious flavour of senna and camomile-flowers brought back a ma-

gical exotic perfume that had floated towards her one day from *his* hair as he bent his head to listen to her foolish talk! And now the senna and camomile were to flavour all her life. She was no longer to enjoy that mystical double existence, those delicious glimpses of dreamland, which made up for all the dulness of the common world that surrounded her.

If she could have died, and made an end of it all! There are moments in life when death seems the *only* issue from a dreadful labyrinth of grief and horror. I suppose it is only very weak-minded people—doubtful vacillating creatures like Prince Hamlet of Denmark—who wish to die, and make an easy end of their difficulties; but Isabel was not by any means strong-minded, and she thought with a bitter pang of envy of the commonplace young women whom she had known to languish and fade in the most interesting pulmonary diseases, while she so vainly yearned for the healing touch which makes a sure end of all mortal fevers. But there was something—one thing in the world yet worth the

weariness of existence—that meeting with *him*—that meeting which was to be also an eternal parting. She would see him once more; he would look down at her with his mysterious eyes—the eyes of Zanoni himself could scarcely have been more mystically dark and deep. She would see him, and perhaps that strangely intermingled joy and anguish would be more fatal than earthly disease, and she would drop dead at his feet, looking to the last at the dark splendour of his face—dying under the spell of his low tender voice. And then, with a shudder, she remembered what Lady Gwendoline had said of her demi-god. Dissipated and an infidel; vain, selfish! Oh, cruel, cruel slander,—the slander of a jealous woman, perhaps, who had loved him and been slighted by him. The Doctor's Wife would not believe any treasonous whisper against her idol. Only from his own lips could come the words that would be strong enough to destroy her illusions. She lay awake all that night, thinking of her interview with Lady Gwendoline, acting the scene over and over again; hearing

the cruel words repeated in her ears with dismal iteration throughout the dark slow hours. The pale cheerless spring daylight came at last, and Mrs. Gilbert feel asleep just when it was nearly time for her to think of getting up.

The doctor breakfasted alone that morning, as he had dined the day before. He begged that Isabel might not be disturbed. A good long spell of rest was the best thing for his wife's head, he told Mrs. Jeffson; to which remark that lady only replied by a suspicious kind of sniff, accompanied by a jerk of the head, and followed by a plaintive sigh, all of which were entirely lost upon the parish-surgeon.

"Females whose headaches keep 'em a-bed when they ought to be seeing after their husband's meals hadn't ought to marry," Mrs. Jeffson remarked, with better sense than grammar, when she took George's breakfast-paraphernalia back to the kitchen. "I heard down the street just now, as *he* come back to the Priory late last night, and I'll lay she'll be goin' out to meet him this afternoon, William."

Mr. Jeffson, who was smoking his matutinal pipe by the kitchen-fire, shook his head with a slow melancholy gesture as his wife made this remark.

"It's a bad business, Tilly," he said, "a bad business first and last. If *he* was any thing of a man, he'd keep away from these parts, and 'ud be above leadin' a poor simple little thing like that astray. Them poetry-books and suchlike, as she's allus a-readin' has half-turned her head long ago, and it only needs a fine chap like him to turn it altogether. I mind what I say to Muster Jarge the night as I fust see her; and I can see her face now, Tilly, as I see it then, with the eyes fixed, and lookin' far away like; and I knew then what I know better still now, my lass,—them two'll never get on together. They warn't made for one another. I wonder sometimes to see the trouble a man 'll take before he gets a pair o' boots, to find out as they're a good fit and won't gall his foot when he comes to wear 'em; but t' same man 'll go and get married as careless and off-hand like, as if there

weren't the smallest chance of his wife's not suiting him. I was took by thy good looks, lass, I won't deny, when I first saw thee," Mr. Jeffson added, with diplomatic gallantry; "but it wasn't because of thy looks as I asked thee to be my true wife, and friend, and companion, throughout this mortal life and all its various troubles."

CHAPTER XIII.

FOR LOVE HIMSELF TOOK PART AGAINST HIMSELF."

It was eleven o'clock when Isabel woke; and it was twelve when she sat down to make some pretence of eating the egg and toast which Mrs. Jeffson set before her. The good woman regarded her young mistress with a grave countenance, and Mrs. Gilbert shrank nervously from that honest gaze. Shame and disgrace—she had denied the application of those hideous words to herself: but the cup which she had repudiated met her lips at every turn, and the flavour of its bitter waters was intermingled with every thing she tasted. She turned away from Mrs. Jeffson, and felt angry with her. Presently, when the faithful housekeeper was busy in the kitchen, Mrs. Gilbert went softly up stairs to her room, and put on her bonnet and shawl.

She was not to meet *him* till three o'clock in the afternoon, and it was now only a little after twelve; but she could not stay in the house. A terrible fever and restlessness had taken possession of her lately. Had not her life been altogether one long fever since Roland Lansdell's advent in Midlandshire? She looked back, and remembered that she had lived once, and had been decently contented, in utter ignorance of this splendid being's existence. She had lived, and had believed in the shadowy heroes of books, and in great clumsy gray-coated officers stationed at Conventford, and in a sickly curate at Camberwell; and long, long ago—oh, unutterable horror!—in a sentimental-looking young chemist's-apprentice in the Walworth Road, who had big watery-looking blue eyes, and was not so *very* unlike Ernest Maltravers, and who gave more liberal threepenny-worths of lavender-water or hair-oil than any other chemist on the Surrey side of the water—to Isabel! not to other people! Miss Sleaford sent one of the boys for the usual threepenny-worth on one occasion, and the che-

mist's measure was very different, and the young lady was not a little touched by this proof of her admirer's devotion.

And looking back now she remembered these things, and wondered at them, and hated herself because of them. There was no low image of a chemist's-assistant lurking dimly in the background of Viola's life when she met her fate in the person of Zanoni. All Isabel's favourite heroines seemed to look out at her reproachfully from their cloudland habitations, as she remembered this portion of her existence. She had lived, and there had been no prophetic vision of *his* face among all her dreams. And now there was nothing for her but to try to go back to the same dull life again, since to-day she was to part from him for ever.

The day was a thorough March day—changeable in mood—now brightened by a sudden glimpse of the sun, now gray and threatening, dull and colourless as the life which lay before Isabel Gilbert when *he* should be gone, and the sweet romance of her existence closed abruptly,

like a story that is never to be finished. The Doctor's Wife shuddered as she went out into the lane, where the dust was blown into eddying circles every now and then by a frolicsome north-easter. She closed the gate safely behind her and went away, and to-day for the first time she felt that her errand was a guilty one. She went into the familiar meadow-pathway: she tried to walk slowly, but her feet seemed to carry her towards Thurston's Crag in spite of herself; and when she was far from Graybridge, and looked at her watch, it was only one o'clock, and there were two long hours that must elapse before Roland Lansdell's coming. It was only a quarter past one when she came in sight of the miller's cottage—the pretty little white-walled habitation nestling low down under big trees, which made a shelter even in winter-time. A girl was standing at a door feeding chickens and calling to them in a loud cheerful voice. There was no sorrowful love-story in *her* life, Mrs. Gilbert thought, as she looked at the bouncing red-elbowed young woman. She would marry some floury-visaged

miller's-man, most likely, and be happy ever after. But it was only a momentary thrill of envy that shot through Isabel's breast. Better to die for Roland Lansdell than to live for a miller's-man in thick clumpy boots and an elaborately stitched smock-frock. Better to have lived for the briefest summer time of joy and triumph, and then to stand aloof upon a rock for ever afterwards, staring at the wide expanse of waters, and thinking of the past, like Napoleon at St. Helena.

"He has loved me!" thought Isabel; "I ought never to be unhappy, when I remember that."

She had brought Shelley with her, and she seated herself upon the bench under the oak; but she only turned the leaves over and over, and listened to the brawling waters at her feet, and thought of Roland Lansdell. Sometimes she tried to think of what her life would be after she had parted from him; but all the future after four o'clock that afternoon seemed to recede far away from her, beyond the limits of her understanding.

She had a vague idea that after this farewell meeting she would be like Louise de la Vallière in the days of her seclusion and penitence. If Father Newman, or any other enthusiastic Romanist, could have found her sitting by the brawling water that afternoon, he would have secured a willing convert to his tender sentimental creed. The poor bewildered spirit pined for the shadowy aisles of some conventual sanctuary, the low and solemn music, the glimmering shrines, the dreamy exaltation and rapture, the separation from a hard commonplace world. But no sympathetic stranger happened to pass that way while Isabel sat there, watching the path by which Roland Lansdell must come. She took out her watch every now and then, always to be disappointed at the slow progress of the time; but at last—at last—just as a sudden gleam of sunshine lighted the waterfall, and flickered upon the winding pathway, a distant church-clock struck three, and the master of Mordred Priory pushed open a little gate, and came in and out among the moss-grown trunks of the bare elms. In the next minute he

was on the bridge; in the next moment, as it seemed, he was seated by Isabel's side, and had taken her passive hand in his. For the last time —for the last time! she thought. Involuntarily her fingers closed on his. How closely they seemed linked together now; they who so soon were to be for ever parted; they between whom all the expanse of the Atlantic would have been only too narrow a barrier!

Mrs. Gilbert looked up sadly and shrinkingly at Roland's face, and saw that it was all flushed and radiant. There was just the faintest expression of nervous hesitation about his mouth; but his dark eyes shone with a resolute glance, and seemed more definite in colour than Isabel had ever seen them yet.

"My darling," he said, "I am very punctual, am I not? I did not think you would be here before me. You can never guess how much I have thought of our meeting to-day, Isabel:—seriously; solemnly even. Do you remember the garden-scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, Izzie? What pretty sportive boy-and-girl gallantry the love-

making seems: and yet what a tragedy comes of it directly after! When I look at you to-day, Isabel, and think of my sleepless nights, my restless weary days, my useless wanderings, my broken vows and wasted resolutions, I look back and remember our first meeting at Warncliffe Castle—our chance meeting. If I had gone away ten minutes sooner, I might not have seen you—I might never have seen you. I look back and see it all. I looked up so indifferently when poor Raymond introduced you to us; it was almost a bore to get up and bow to you. I thought you were very pretty, a beautiful pale-faced automaton, with wonderful eyes that belonged of right to some Italian picture, and not to a commonplace little person like you. And then—having so little to do, being altogether such an idle purposeless wretch, and being glad of any excuse for getting away from my stately cousin and my dear prosy old uncle—I must needs stroll to Hurstonleigh Grove, and meet you again under the changing shadows of the grand old trees. Oh, what was it, Isabel? why was it? Was it only

idle curiosity, as I believed, that took me there? Or had the cruel arrow shot home already; was my destiny sealed even then? I don't know—I don't know. I am not a good man, Izzie; but I am not utterly bad either. I went away from you, my dear; I *did* try to avoid the great peril of my life; but—you remember the monk in Hugo's *Notre Dame*. It seems a grand story in that book, Izzie, but it's the commonest story in all the world. Some day—some careless day—we look out of the window and see the creature dancing in the sunshine, and from that moment every other purpose of our life is done with and forgotten; we can do nothing but go out and follow her wherever she beckons us. If she is a wicked siren, she may lure us into the dark recesses of her cave and pick our bones at her leisure. If she is Undine, and plunges deep down into the blue water, we can only take a header and go to the bottom after her. But if she is a dear little innocent creature, worthy of our best love and worship, why should we not be happy with her ever afterwards, like the good people in the

story-books? why should we not plan a bright life of happiness and fidelity? Isabel, my darling, I want to talk very seriously to you to-day. The crisis has come in our lives, and I am to find out to-day whether you are the true woman I believe you to be, or only a pretty little village coquette, who has fooled me to the top of my bent, and who can whistle me off and let me down the wind to prey at fortune directly I become a nuisance. Izzie, I want you to answer a serious question to-day, and all the happiness of my future life depends upon your answer."

"Mr. Lansdell!"

She looked up at him—very much frightened by his manner, but with her hand still clasping his. The link must so soon be broken for ever. Only for a little while longer might she retain that dear hand in hers. Half an hour more, and they would be parted for ever and ever. The pain of that thought was strangely mingled with the delicious joy of being with him, of hearing from his lips that she was beloved. What did she care for Lady Gwendoline now?—cruel jealous Lady

Gwendoline, who had outraged and insulted the purity of her love.

"Isabel," Roland said, very gravely, bending his head to a level with hers, as he spoke, but looking at the ground rather than at her, "it is time that we ended this farce of duty and submission to the world; we have tried to submit, and to rule our lives by the laws which other people have made for us. But we cannot—we cannot, my dear. We are only hypocrites who try to mask our revolt under the pretence of submission. You come here and meet me, and we are happy together—unutterably and innocently happy. But you leave me and go home to your husband, and smile at him, and tell him that, while you were out walking, you met Mr. Lansdell, and so on; and you hoodwink and fool him, and act a perpetual lie for his delusion. All that must cease, Isabel. That Preacher, whom *I* think the noblest reformer, the purest philosopher whose voice was ever heard upon this earth, said that we cannot serve two masters. You cannot go on living the life you have lived for the last three weeks, Isabel.

That is impossible. You have made a mistake. The world will tell you that, having made it, you must abide by it, and atone for your folly by a life of dissimulation. There are women brave enough —good enough, if you like—to do this, and to bear their burden patiently; but you are not one of them. You cannot dissimulate. Your soul has flown to me like a bird out of a cage; it is mine henceforth and for ever; as surely as that I love you,—fatally, unaccountably, mysteriously, but eternally. I know the strength of my chain, for I have tried to break it. I have held aloof, and tested the endurance of my love. If I ask you now to accept that love, it is because I know that it is true and pure,—the true metal, Izzie, the real virgin gold! I suppose a narrow vein of it runs through every man's nature; but it is only one woman's hand that has power to strike upon the precious ore. I love you, Isabel; and I want you to make an end of your present life, and leave this place for ever. I have written to an agent to get me a little villa on the outskirts of Naples. I went there alone, Izzie, two months ago, and set

up your image in the empty rooms, and fancied you hovering here and there in your white dress, upon the broad marble terrace, with the blue sea below you, and the mountains above. I have made a hundred plans for our life, Izzie. There is not a whim or fancy of yours that I have not remembered. Ah, what happiness! to show you wonderful things and beautiful scenes! What delicious joy to see your eyes open their widest before all the fairest pictures of earth! I fancy you with me, Isabel, and, behold, my life is transformed. I have been so tired of every thing in the world; and yet, with you by my side, all the world will be as fresh as Eden was to Adam on the first day of his life. Isabel, you need have no doubt of me. I have doubted myself, and tested myself. Mine is no light love, that time or custom can change or lessen: if it were, I would have done my duty, and stayed away from you for ever. I have thought of your happiness as well as my own, darling; and I ask you now to trust me, and leave this place for ever."

Something like a cry of despair broke from

Isabel's lips. "You ask me to go away with you!" she exclaimed, looking at Roland as if she could scarcely believe the testimony of her own ears. "You ask me to leave George, and be your—mistress! Oh, Lady Gwendoline only spoke the truth, then. You don't understand—no one understands how I love you!"

She had risen as she spoke, and flung herself passionately against the balustrade of the bridge, sobbing bitterly, with her face hidden by her clasped hands.

"Isabel, for heaven's sake, listen to me Can you doubt the purity of my love—the truth, the honesty of my intentions? I ask you to sign no unequal compact. Give me your life, and I'll give you mine in exchange—every day—every hour. Whatever the most exacting wife can claim of her husband, you shall receive from me. Whatever the truest husband can be to his wife, I swear to be to you. It is only a question of whether you love me, Isabel. You have only to choose between me and that man yonder."

"Oh, Roland! Roland! I have loved you

so — and you could think that I —. Oh, you must despise me — you must despise me very much, and think me very wicked, or you would never—"

She couldn't say any more; but she still leant against the bridge, sobbing for her lost delusion.

Lady Gwendoline had been right, after all,— this is what Isabel thought,—and there had been no Platonism, no poet-worship on Roland Lansdell's side; only the vulgar everyday wish to run away with another man's wife. From first to last she had been misunderstood; she had been the dupe of her own fancies, her own dreams. Lady Gwendoline's cruel words were only cruel truths. It was no Dante, no Tasso, who had wandered by her side: only a dissipated young country squire, in the habit of running away with other people's wives, and glorying in his iniquity. There was no middle standing-place which Roland Lansdell could occupy in this foolish girl's mind. If he was not a demi-god, he must be a villain. If he was not an exalted creature, full of poetic aspirations and

noble fancies, he must be a profligate young idler, ready to whisper any falsehood into the ears of foolish rustic womanhood. All the stories of aristocratic villany that she had ever read flashed suddenly back upon Mrs. Gilbert's mind, and made a crowd of evidence against Lady Anna Lansdell's son. If he was not the one grand thing which she had believed him to be—a poetic and honourable adorer—he was in nothing the hero of her dreams. She loved him still, and must continue to love him, in spite of all his delinquencies: but she must love him henceforward with fear and trembling, as a splendid iniquitous creature, who had not even one virtue to set against a thousand crimes. Such thoughts as these crowded upon her, as she leaned sobbing on the narrow wooden rail of the bridge; while Roland Lansdell stood by, watching her with a grave and angry countenance.

"Is this acting, Mrs. Gilbert? Is this show of surprise and indignation a little comedy, which you play when you want to get rid of your lovers? Am I to accept my dismissal, and bid you good

afternoon, and put up patiently with having been made the veriest fool that ever crossed this bridge?"

"Oh, Roland!" cried Isabel, lifting her head and looking piteously round at him, "I loved you so—I l-loved so!"

"You love me so, and prove your love by fooling me with tender looks and blushes, till I believe that I have met the one woman in all the world who is to make my life happy. Oh, Isabel, I have loved you because I thought you unlike other women. Am I to find that it is only the old story after all—falsehood, and trick, and delusion? It was a feather in your cap, to have Mr. Lansdell of the Priory madly in love with you; and now that he grows troublesome, you send him about his business. I am to think this, I suppose. It has all been coquetry and falsehood from first to last."

"Falsehood! Oh, Roland, when I love you so dearly—so dearly and truly; not as you love me, —with a cruel love that would bring shame and disgrace upon me. You never can be more to

me than you are now. We may part; but there is no power on earth that can part my soul from yours, or lessen my love. I came to you this afternoon to say good-by for ever, because I have heard that cruel things have been said of me by people who do not understand my love. Ah, how should those common people understand, when even you do not, Roland? I came to say good-by; and then, after to-day, my life will be finished. You know what you said that night: 'The curtain goes down, and all is over!' I shall think of you for ever and ever, till I die. Ah, is there any kind of death that can ever make me forget you? but I will never come here again to see you. I will always try to do my duty to my husband."

"Your husband!" cried Mr. Lansdell with a strident laugh; "had we not better leave *his* name out of the question? Oh, Isabel!" he exclaimed, suddenly changing his tone, "so help me Heaven, I cannot understand you. Are you only an innocent child, after all, or the wiliest coquette that ever lived? You must be one or

the other. You speak of your husband. My poor dear, it is too late in the day now to talk of him. You should have thought of him when we first met; when your eyelids first drooped beneath my gaze: when your voice first grew tremulous as you spoke my name. From the very first you have lured me on. I am no trickster or thief, to steal another man's property. If your heart had been your husband's when first I met you, the beauty of an angel in a cathedral fresco would not have been farther away from me than yours. Depend upon it, Eve was growing tired of Eden when the serpent began to talk to her. If you had loved your husband, Isabel, I should have bowed my head before the threshold of your home, as I would at the entrance to a chapel. But I saw that you did not love him; I very soon saw that you did love, or seemed to love, me. Heaven knows I struggled against the temptation, and only yielded at last when my heart told me that my love was true and honest, and worthy of the sacrifice I ask from you. I do ask that sacrifice; boldly, as a man who is prepared to give measure for measure.

The little world to which you will say good-by, Isabel, is a world whose gates will close on me in the same hour. Henceforth your life will be mine, with all its forfeitures. I am not an ambitious man; and have long ceased to care about making any figure in a world which has always seemed to me more or less like a show at a fair, with clanging cymbals and brazen trumpets, and promise and protestation and boasting outside, and only delay and disappointment and vexation within. I do not give up very much, therefore; but what I have I freely resign. Come with me, Isabel, and I will take you away to the beautiful places you have been pleased to hear me talk about. All the world is ours, my darling, except this little corner of Midlandshire. Great ships are waiting to waft us away to far Southern shores, and tropical paradises, and deep unfathomable forests. All the earth is organised for our happiness. The money that has been so useless to me until now shall have a new use henceforward, for it shall be dedicated to your pleasure. Do you remember opening your eyes very wide the other

day, Isabel, and crying out that you would like to see Rome, and poor Keats's grave, and the Colosseum,—Byron's Colosseum,—where the poetic gladiator thought of his wife and children, eh, Izzie? I made such a dream out of that little childish exclamation. I know the balcony in which we will sit, darling, after dark nights in Carnival time, to watch the crowd in the streets below, and, on one grandest night of all, the big dome of St. Peter's shining like a canopy of light, and all the old classic pediments and pillars blazing out of the darkness, as in a city of living fire. Isabel, you cannot have been ignorant of the end to which our fate was drifting us; you must have known that I should sooner or later say what I have said to-day."

"Oh, no, no, no!" cried Mrs. Gilbert despairingly, "I never thought that you would ask me to be more to you than I am now: I never thought that it was wicked to come here and meet you. I have read of people, who by some fatality could never marry, loving each other, and being true to others for years and

years—till death, sometimes; and I fancied that you loved me like that: and the thought of your love made me so happy; and it was such happiness to see you sometimes, and to think of you afterwards, remembering every word you had said, and seeing your face as plainly as I see it now. I thought, till yesterday, that this might go on for ever, and never, never believed that you would think me like those wicked women who run away from their husbands."

"And yet you love me?"

"With all my heart."

She looked at him with eyes still drowned in tears, but radiant with the truth of her sentimental soul, which had never before revealed itself so artlessly as now. Fondly as she worshipped her idol, his words had little power to move her, now that he was false to his attributes, and came down upon common ground and wooed her as an everyday creature. If Mr. Lansdell had declared his intention of erecting a marble mausoleum in the grounds of Mor-

dred, and had requested Isabel to commit suicide in order to render herself competent to occupy it with him immediately, she would have thought his request both appropriate and delightful, and would have assented on the spot. But his wild talk of foreign travel had no temptation for her. True, she saw as in a bright and changing vision a picture of what her life might be far away amidst wild romantic regions in that dear companionship. But between herself and those far-away visions there was a darkly-brooding cloud of shame and disgrace. The Graybridge people might say what they chose of her: she could afford to hold her head high and despise their slanderous whispers: but she could *not* afford to tarnish her love—her love which had no existence out of bright ideal regions wherein shame could never enter.

Roland Lansdell watched her face in silence for some moments, and faintly comprehended the exaltation of spirit which lifted this foolish girl above him to-day. But he was a weak vacillating young man, who was unfortunate enough

not to believe in any thing: and he was, in his own fashion, truly and honestly in love,—too much in love to be just or reasonable,—and he was very angry with Isabel. The tide of his feeling had gathered strength day by day, and had relentlessly swept away every impediment, only to be breasted at last by a rocky wall; here, where he thought to meet only the free boundless ocean, ready to receive and welcome him.

"Isabel," he said at last, "have you ever thought what your life is to be, always, after this parting of to-day? You are likely to live forty years, and even when you have got through them, you will not be an old woman. Have you ever contemplated those forty years, with three hundred and sixty-five days in every one of them; every day to be spent with a man you don't love—a man with whom you have not one common thought? Think of that, Isabel; and then, if you do love me, think of the life I offer you, and choose between them."

"I can only make one choice," Mrs. Gilbert

answered, in a low sad voice. "I shall be very unhappy, I daresay; but I will do my duty to my husband and—think of you."

"So be it!" exclaimed Mr. Lansdell, with a long-drawn sigh. "In that case, good-by." He held out his hand, and Isabel was startled by the coldness of its touch.

"You are not angry with me?" she asked piteously.

"I have no right to be angry with any one but myself. I do not suppose you meant any harm; but you have done me the deepest wrong a woman can do to a man. I have nothing to say to you except good-by. For mercy's sake go away, and leave me to myself."

She had no pretence for remaining with him after this; so she went away, very slowly, frightened and sorrowful. But when she had gone a few yards along the pathway under the trees, she felt all at once that she could not leave him thus. She must see his face once more: she must know for certain whether he was angry with her or not.

She crept slowly back to the spot where she had left him, and found him lying at full length upon the grass, with his face hidden on his folded arms. With a sudden instinct of grief and terror she knew that he was crying, and falling down on her knees by his side, murmured, amidst her sobs—

"Oh, pray forgive me! Pray do not be angry with me! I love you so dearly and so truly! Only say that you forgive me."

Roland Lansdell lifted his face and looked at her. Ah, what a reproachful look it was, and how long it lived in her memory and disturbed her peace!

"I will forgive you," he answered sternly, "when I have learnt to endure my life without you."

He dropped his head again upon his folded arms, and Isabel knelt by his side for some minutes watching him silently; but he never stirred; and she was too much frightened and surprised by his anger, and remorsefully impressed with a vague sense of her own wrong-

doing, to dare address him further. So at last she got up and went away. She began to feel that she had been, somehow or other, very wicked, and that her sin had brought misery upon this man whom she loved.

END OF VOL. II.

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